# ‘Rowing Through the Storm’: The Ocean and Early Medieval Iona

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## Short Abstract

This is the first comprehensive study of the relationship between early medieval Iona and the ocean, showing how the ocean impacted every level of Ionan life: physical, social, cultural, and economic. The environmental context of the medieval monastery forces historians to rethink some fundamental presumptions held about the early community. I argue that greater attention should be given to the ocean's ability to challenge and isolate the monks of Iona, and to a more local understanding of the medieval monastery and of the wider medieval world.

The **Introduction** sets out the scope of this study. It offers an overview of the early history of Iona, laying out the structure, method, and historiographical context of this thesis. **Chapter One** treats the ocean's role in the climate of Iona. The behaviour of the ocean shifted with the climatic changes of the first millennium AD, undercutting the agricultural sustainability of Iona. As is shown in **Chapter Two**, the ocean's ability to connect was one means of overcoming Iona's limited agricultural sustainability; but the sea should be understood primarily as a local method of delivering the needs of Iona, less as a tool for inter-regional or global mobility. While many authors influenced how Iona's monks understood the ocean culturally, as **Chapter Three** argues, it was the local oceanscape that defined the Ionan appreciation of the sea in their literature. **Chapter Four** compares the Ionan experience of island monasticism to the example of Lérins, as well as Irish and British patterns of insular monasticism, showing the commonalities in addition to Iona's unique economic response to its environment and geography. In the **Conclusions**, I discuss some intersections with historiographical perspectives. I review how the ocean challenged the monks of Iona, but also how they derived meaning from those challenges.

## Long Abstract

Located on a small Hebridean island off the west coast of Scotland, despite its isolation, the monastery of Iona was one of the most important communities of the early medieval insular world. Its founder, St Columba, and its second-most-famous abbot, St Adomnán, are a common focus for scholars who study the island monastery, its monks, and Iona's lasting significance. This thesis contributes to that rich body of scholarship, focusing on the period from Iona's foundation until the end of Adomnán's abbacy (*c*.AD 563 – *c*.AD 704). Yet I take a novel environmental perspective, commenting on the relationship between the early monastery and the ocean that surrounded it. Scholars have long recognised the importance of the ocean to Iona: seaways were 'highways' for these monks and the ocean held a special place in the Ionan imagination. However, there has been no comprehensive study of the ocean context of Iona and its monks, which this thesis shows is a necessary perspective to understand the monastery fully. I examine the connection Iona had to the ocean on multiple levels throughout this thesis, outlining its physical, social, cultural, and economic importance. I argue that by understanding the ocean environment of Iona, historians gain a more subtle understanding both of this monastery and of the early medieval world more generally: an Iona and medieval world that look more isolated and more defined by the local environment, deriving meaning from those contexts.

**Introduction**

The ocean landscape of Iona framed the life of St Columba. The ocean was the vehicle that delivered Columba to the island, but it was also a force that could divide his monastic community from the outside world. This thesis concentrates on the period in Iona's history when the monastic community produced the best sources reflecting the deep connection its monks had to the ocean.

**The History of Early Medieval Iona**

Columba maintained close connections with his homeland and kin even after he left for Iona. While little is known about Columba's early life, the career of the saint comes into clearer focus after his arrival in Britain. He established Iona in the sea-linked kingdom of Dál Riata. From there he led a religious mission to the Picts and built a network of monastic foundations. His abbatial successors continued this

work, growing the monastic *familia* by evangelising the English, but the Easter Controversy came to limit the extent of Ionan influence. The late-seventh century abbot Adomnán was one of the most remarkable products of the monastery, and his writings are some of the best windows into the relationship Iona had with the ocean: a contradictory relationship, as much about isolation as connection.

**Structure, Methods, and Historiography**

The thesis is divided into two parts each containing two chapters. The first part focusses on the physical relationship the monastery had with the ocean: as an environmental force, and as a force for physical connectivity. The second considers the socio-cultural significance of the ocean to Iona: how the ocean landscape shaped the spiritual and literary understandings the monks had of the sea, and how the ocean shaped the economic and social world of Iona in comparison to other monasteries. This structure is inspired by Fernand Braudel and the Annales School. This is also a thesis that contributes to the growing field of Environmental History. The holistic appreciation of Iona's relationship to the ocean shown in this thesis attempts to refocus the local at a time when global historiographical perspectives dominate.

**Chapter One – The Ocean Climate and Agricultural Sustainability**

This chapter puts the early medieval community into the context of the wider climatic changes of the first millennium, examining the role of the ocean in those changes, and investigating the effects on the community's agricultural sustainability.

**Iona's Ocean Climate**

Iona and the west coast of Scotland are exposed to the North Atlantic Current. Even when compared to eastern Scotland, the Hebridean climate is defined by its 'oceanicity'. The climate has changed over time, and early medieval Iona would have been impacted by the Dark Age Cold Period, a climatic shift defined in part by a change in ocean behaviour. This cooler climate may have had sweeping effects on early medieval society and agricultural productivity. For the monks of Iona, this increased the average amount of precipitation and the intensity of storms.

**Diet and Agricultural Programme**

Archaeological evidence for Iona's Iron Age occupation points towards the pre-monastic community relying on food imports to sustain itself. While Columba's

monks increased the productivity of the island, they also depended on sourcing food from off island. The monks did however develop a sophisticated programme of arable agriculture. The same should not be said of the community's ability to fish, despite evidence to the contrary. Overall, it was Iona's island geography, and its challenges, that shaped the monks' agricultural practice.

**Between Eden and Starvation**

The discovery of butchered horse bone in the early Christian middens of Iona might suggest that the Ionan community experienced food shortages. The dominance of wild-animal imports in the faunal record might also reflect an agricultural strategy of diversification, potentially in response to these food shortages and the changing climate. This strategy may have been paired with a focus on cereal production and extracting more resources from surrounding communities. However, Iona's main agricultural strategy was engaging with Columba's sanctity to appeal for divine aid. The local communities that surrounded Iona likewise looked to the monastery to play this role on their behalf.

**Conclusion**

It has been the widespread assumption that Iona was a self-sustaining and highly productive community. This can no longer be taken for granted. The ocean could limit the island's sustainability, but it was also how Iona accessed outside food resources and deployed their agricultural strategies.

## Chapter Two – Seaways and Ocean Movement

By analysing all the journeys that appear in Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, one can see the importance of the ocean to how Iona's monks moved in their world. The ocean journeys can be divided into three main categories: local to the kingdom of Dál Riata, in which Iona was situated; within the larger insular world; and potential global journeys, outside of the British Isles.

**Ionan Boats**

The Irish currach, made of hides stretched over a wooden frame, was one type of boat used by Iona's monks. All Ionan craft seem to have shared some common characteristics and limitations: squares sails, a crew of rowers, but poor windward performance.

**Dál Riata Archipelagos**

Dál Riata was an archipelagic kingdom connected by seaways. Even the small gap between Iona and Mull needed sailing expertise. The ultra-local archipelago of Iona, Mull, Tiree, and Coll was crucial to the monastery. Journeys among those isles and across Dál Riata reflected the ocean dangers that surrounded Iona. These journeys were also encoded with the socio-political relationships Iona had with the surrounding kindreds of Dál Riata. While the Cenél Loairn were of prime importance to Iona, the ocean journeys described in the *Life* reveal the ability of Iona's monks to straddle political divides.

**Insular Seaways**

The journeys made by Ionan monks to Ireland clustered around the northern coasts and the Irish midlands. Some of the real ports and routes taken by the Columban community are revealed in these journeys, but many reflected the political interests and priorities of Adomnán and previous Ionan abbots. Much less detail is preserved for the few journeys to Pictland and Northumbria. This also reflected the political interests of Adomnán, but so too the limited effectiveness of ocean connectivity in the wider insular world.

**Iona and the Western Sealanes**

The arrival of Gallic sailors at a port in Dál Riata might signal the existence of sea routes that linked Iona to the continent and wider medieval world. A great deal has been written about the potential trade links between the insular world and the Mediterranean, but Iona was at best in a position of secondary contact. Even the potential voyage of the bishop Arculf from the Near East to Iona reinforces this vision of secondary connectivity.

**Conclusion**

The ocean was primarily a means of providing for Iona's proximate needs, both material and social. Despite a historiographical push to write more global histories, the power of the ocean and seaways to connect medieval people was maximised at a local scale.

## Chapter Three – The Ocean in Ionan Literature

It is difficult to define a precise corpus of works written by the monks of Iona. It is far safer to attribute the body of writing normally associated with the island monastery to the broader Columban *familia*. This body of literature shared an interest in the ocean. By working through the potential literary influences felt by Iona's monks, the Ionan understanding of the ocean can be deciphered.

### Classical Literature

Classical literature had a limited impact on Iona's view of the ocean. While themes of seaborn exile and ocean peripherality were influential, it was the Christian reprogramming of classical ideals that affected the Ionan monks most.

### Biblical Texts

The Bible was foundational in how the Columban monks viewed the ocean. The biblical accounts of Leviathan, Jonah, and Christ on Galilee were influential because they played with the tension between the ocean being ordered by God, while remaining the embodiment of chaos. How Columba interacted with the ocean and overcame that tension spoke to the saint's holiness.

### Patristic and Late Antique Influences

Late antique authors filled the library of Iona but said very little about the ocean. These authors did reaffirm the classical understanding that the ocean was peripheral, but added a Christian lens, associating the ocean fringe with peripheral or heretical practices. Iona's authors adopted this view too, but found meaning in their marginality, encoding their local seascape with theological significance.

### Early Irish Literature

Contemporary Irish hagiography did not have the same interest in the ocean as the Ionan canon. If the category of analysis is widened to the broader natural world, there are some parallels, but the Ionan view of the ocean is best understood in comparison with the *Voyage of St Brendan* and with the early *immrama*. The ocean in these works, and in the Ionan corpus, was an environment where one could experience God's judgement: both salvation and damnation.

**Conclusion**

The local seascape of Iona was an environment where the monastery's theology could be acted out and understood. Daily tasks that involved sailing the Hebrides became methods of living in the image of Christ and of Columba. The distinct Ionan view of the ocean seems to have been directed primarily towards the Columban *familia* itself and had much to do with this intimate landscape.

## Chapter Four – Iona and the Ocean in Comparison

Islands became a popular site for monastic houses in late antiquity because they shared similar characteristics to the Egyptian desert: these were the ideals of physical and worldly separation. Iona's distinctive expression of these ideals becomes clear in comparison to other examples of island monasticism throughout history.

**Lérins**

The late antique monastery of Lérins matched the status and significance of Iona. Yet many Lerinian authors ignored or obscured the insularity of the island, preferring to characterise the monastery as being a desert foundation. Archaeological excavations have shown that the community was not as wealthy as it has often been portrayed as being, relying instead on support from the episcopal Church of Gaul. While the sea was necessary to connect Lérins to this support, unlike Iona, its monks seem to have been passive rather than active users of the sea.

**Irish Island Monasticism**

While early Irish island monasteries have been viewed as 'bridgeheads' for the first missionaries, sitting away from pagan society, a model of secular cooperation may have also been common. Early island monks could be used to neutralise contested political space or take over islands with pagan 'otherworldly' associations. This could have involved integrating pre-Christian belief with Christian monastic practice. The best avenue for comparing Iona's experience to Irish island monasticism is the common difficulty these monasteries had in establishing self-sufficiency. Yet in contrast to Irish examples, Iona was the mother house of a large *paruchia*, not a small family church or hermitage: this had significant implications.

### Island Monasticism in Britain

Some scholars have sought to decentre the influence of Iona and its model of island monasticism in Scotland. Island monasteries may have been an early expression of Christian monastic culture in northern Britain, perhaps adopting indigenous beliefs related to islands. Even after Iona's foundation, rival island monasteries could have reflected a more heterogeneous insular monastic culture. In any case, Iona stands out from among these foundations because of the large network of dependent monasteries that it founded. Semi-island landscapes were a more common choice for English foundations. Anglo-Saxon monasteries often evoked island geography for theological reasons but avoided the problems that came with genuine insularity.

### Conclusion

Iona's ocean geography was inescapable. It forced the monastery into a relationship with the mainland and with its daughter foundations. Perhaps this led Iona to develop an economic structure that needed a large *paruchia* and to centralise control over its *familia*.

## Conclusions

The ocean challenged the agricultural sustainability of Iona, but ocean connectivity, maximised at the local level, also helped to overcome the drawbacks created by Iona's environment. While Ionan authors drew on multiple traditions to understand the ocean, it was by living in their seascape that they developed their distinct view. The monastery also constructed an economic programme that answered the common problems faced by island monasteries.

### Historiographical Connections

Interacting with the thought of the Annales School, Environmental History, and other historical studies of the sea, this thesis is part of a growing call for more localised histories. While a tension might underlie this thesis, seeing Iona's relationship to the ocean as both common and distinct, the particular ocean landscape of the island is the key to resolving this.

**The Celestial Harbour**

The ocean had a significant role in Ionan life at every level of interaction: physically, ecologically, socially, politically, culturally, and economically. This thesis confronts many preconceptions of Iona as, for example, self-sustaining and highly connected, appreciating how Iona was challenged by its environment and isolated by the ocean. Monks valued these struggles because of the example of Columba, and the meaning generated by the socio-economic relationship they had with the landscape.

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My years at Oxford have been just as influential. The teaching and direction given to me by Dr Conrad Leyser and Dr Matthew Landrus in my master's degree were crucial. I would like to thank Dr Ida Toth and Prof Mark Williams for their patience teaching me Latin and Old Irish. Chiefly, I thank Prof Julia Smith. Her doctoral training seminar prepared me for the work that was ahead, while introducing me to the community of medievalists here at Oxford. Her comments on my research then and subsequently were invaluable. I also thank her, Dr Matthew Kempshall, and Dr Helen Gittos for their many useful remarks on portions of this thesis: they improved it and bear no responsibility for its flaws, those are all my own.

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ACW | Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation (1946-). |
| *AT* | *The Annals of Tigernach*, ed. trans. William Stokes, 'The Annals of Tigernach', *Revue Celtique*, 16 (1895), pp. 374-419; 17 (1896), pp. 6-33, 119-263, 337-420; 18 (1987), pp. 9-59, 150-97, 267-303; ed. Emer Purcell and Donnchadh Ó Corráin, trans. Gearóid Mac Niocaill and William Stokes, *The Annals of Tigernach*, Corpus of Electronic Texts, https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100002A/index.html (7 Jun. 2025). |
| *AU* | *The Annals of Ulster*, ed. trans. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster (To A.D. 1131)* (Dublin, 1983); ed. Pádraig Bambury and Stephen Beechinor, trans. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, Corpus of Electronic Texts, https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100001A/index.html (7 Jun. 2025). |
| CCSL | Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (Turnhout, 1953-). |
| CSEL | Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna and Salzburg, 1866-). |
| *CS* | *Chronicum Scotorum*, ed. trans. William H. Hennessy, *Chronicum Scotorum. A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from the Earliest Times to A.D. 1135* (London, 1866); ed. Beatrix Färber and Ruth Murphy, trans. William H. Hennessy and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *Chronicon Scotorum*, Corpus of Electronic Texts, https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100016/index.html (7 Jun. 2025). |
| FC | The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation (1947-). |
| *HE* | Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, ed. trans. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969). |
| MGH, SRM | Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum (7 vols). |
| NPNF2 | Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series (14 vols, 1890-1900). |

| | |
|---|---|
| PL | Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (221 vols, Paris, 1844-1864). |
| SC | Sources Chrétiennes (Paris, 1942-). |
| *VC* | Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, ed. and trans. Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, rev edn (Oxford, 1991); trans. Richard Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona. Life of St Columba* (London, 1995); ed. William Reeves, *The Life of St Columba, Founder of Hy, written by Adamnan* (Dublin and Edinburgh, 1857); ed. William Skene, trans. A.P. Forbes, *The Life of St Columba, Founder of Hy, written by Adamnan* (Edinburgh, 1874). |

## A Note on Translations

Translations are my own when the original language appears in the footnote. Any translations consulted are cited in the first instance that a primary source is referenced, and in the bibliography.

All references to the Bible are taken from the Vulgate and the Douay-Rheims Translation: *The Holy Bible. Douay-Rheims Version: Biblia Sacra. Juxta Vulgatam Clementinam* (London, 2008).

## A Note on the Use of 'Sea' and 'Ocean'

Throughout this thesis 'sea' and 'ocean' are often used interchangeably. This is simply to avoid the over-repetition of 'ocean'. As is seen in Chapter Three, the ocean was radically different to the sea and was thought of as such by early insular authors.

# INTRODUCTION

Saint Columba set sail for Britain 'wishing to be a pilgrim for Christ'.[1] This Irishman's voyage into the ocean became a defining moment in his story and the history of the insular world. Many were inspired by his example and sailed in his wake to the monastery he founded on the little island of Iona.[2] More than a century later, the community gathered there asked their abbot to write down an account of Columba's life. That account placed before the eyes of its readers the holiness of their monastic patron, and it allowed them to grasp what made this man so special in the sight of God.[3] The hagiography closes with an ocean miracle. The saint's funeral was expected to be crowded, with the tiny island being filled with mourners rowing from all the provinces that surrounded Iona. Before he passed away, Columba told his monks not to worry, and he promised that his brethren would perform the funerary rites undisturbed. As foretold, a violent storm sealed off the island for three days and nights, preventing any sailors from approaching Iona. Adomnán, the abbot who composed this life, asked his readers to reflect on how honoured Columba must have been by God for Him to grant this level of control over the sea.[4] The sea was the vehicle that brought this saint to Iona and yet it could also cut the island off from the outside world. That Columba mastered both these aspects of the ocean environment signalled his sanctity to Adomnán's readers.

Columba was an 'island soldier', inextricably linked to the ocean.[5] This thesis focusses on the island of Iona, the sea that surrounded it, and the many journeys that the larger community of Columba made upon the waves. Crucially, it

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[1] *VC*, §pref.2: *pro Christo perigrinari volens*.
[2] *VC*, §§i.2, i.4-5, i.16, i.25-7, i.30, i.32, ii.39.
[3] *VC*, §§pref.1-2, iii.23.
[4] *VC*, §iii.23; Matt. 8:27.
[5] *VC*, §pref.2: *insulanus miles*.

appreciates the two roles the ocean had for Iona's monks: its ability to connect, and its power to divide. The first full-length study devoted to the important role of the ocean in the history of Iona and its monks, this close attention to the ocean environment deepens our understanding of the monastery and its community. It is an emphasis that leads to a reassessment of the monastery's character, its success, and its influence on the early medieval world. The thesis concentrates on Iona from its foundation in the sixth century until the death of Adomnán, when sources are numerous, and best reflect the connection the Ionan community had to the ocean.[6] They are some of the best resources available to early medieval historians of the insular world, and an ocean-directed analysis offers a new way of looking at them. It is also a method of analysis that can change how historians perceive the early medieval world: a vision of it, like the ocean in Columba's life, that is characterised as much by division as by connection. These first pages aim to familiarise the reader with the actors in Iona's early history as well as the social and political geography that are covered in the chapters that follow. They also discuss some of the historiographical background to this research, contextualising the perspective of this thesis.

## The History of Early Medieval Iona

A sixteenth-century portrayal of the saint's departure interpreted Columba's voyage as a dramatic exile, leaving Ireland 'to behold her no more, […] nor to see her men nor her women, nor to tread on the soil of [Ireland] forever'.[7] The sixth-century reality was that Columba would make at least two, but potential many sea-

[6] For a further discussion of the written sources that this study focuses on, see below, Chapter Three, pp. 141-7.
[7] Maghnas Ó Domhnaill, *Betha Colaim Chille*, ed. and trans. Alexander O'Kelleher and Gertrude Schoepperle, *Betha Colaim Chille = Life of Columcille* (Urbana, 1918; repr. Dublin, 1994), §180.

bound journeys back and forth between Ireland and Britain. After all Columba, or Columb Cille in Old Irish, was of noble birth and maintained close connections to his Irish kin.[8] Born *c.* AD 520,[9] his father Fedelmid mac Ferguso was grandson to Conall Gulban, the founder of the Cenél Conaill dynasty.[10] The Cenél Conaill were one familial branch of the Uí Néill, 'the descendants of Níall', each lineage descending from a son of Níall Noígiallach, 'Niall of the Nine Hostages'.[11] The Cenél Conaill occupied an area around modern Co. Donegal, giving their name to the old regional title of Tír Conaill, 'the Land of Conall'. They were one of the dominant Northern Uí Néill kin groups who occupied this area and that around Co. Tyrone, whereas Southern Uí Néill families occupied the central belt of Ireland.[12] The Cenél Conaill competed with neighbouring branches of the Northern Uí Néill for over-kingship, sometimes gaining enough power to rule over the entirety of the Uí Néill, and on occasion ruling over the whole island of Ireland as Kings of Tara. Áed mac Ainmirech (*ob.* AD 598), Columba's cousin, achieved this level of dominance in the saint's lifetime.[13]

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[8] For some early references to the name Columb Cille and its origins, see: *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, ed. and trans. Jacopo Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille. A Critical Edition* (Dublin, 2020), §v.16; *Félire Óengusso*, ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, *Félire Óengusso Céli Dé = The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London, 1905), pp. 139, 145-9; Ó Domhnaill, *Betha Colaim Chille*, §53. *Cf.* Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, pp. 212-3; Brian Lacey, *Cenél Conaill and the Donegal Kingdoms, AD 500-800* (Dublin, 2006), p. 189; Nollaig Ó Muraíle, 'The Columban Onomastic Legacy', in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 193-5; Richard Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona. Life of St Columba* (London, 1995), n. 7.

[9] For a table showing the diverse scholarly dating of Columba's life and voyage, see Daniel P. Mc Carthy, 'The Chronology of Saint Columba's Life', in Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes (eds.), *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship. A Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín* (Turnhout, 2015), p. 5.

[10] For a summary of Columba's lineage, see Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 8-9, n. 16.

[11] For the rise of the Uí Néill and the person of Níall, see Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, 2nd edn (Dublin, 2001), pp. 70-86, and T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 441-68. Against this standard view, see Lacey, *Cenél Conaill and the Donegal Kingdoms*, pp. 145-66, 320-24; *cf.* Colmán Etchingham's review in *Irish Historical Studies*, 36 (2008), pp. 100-2.

[12] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 15-37, 52.

[13] *AU*, §598.2; Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, pp. 48-69, 94, 269-71; *VC*, §§i.11, i.49. On the kingship of Tara as a 'national monarchy': Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 481-521.

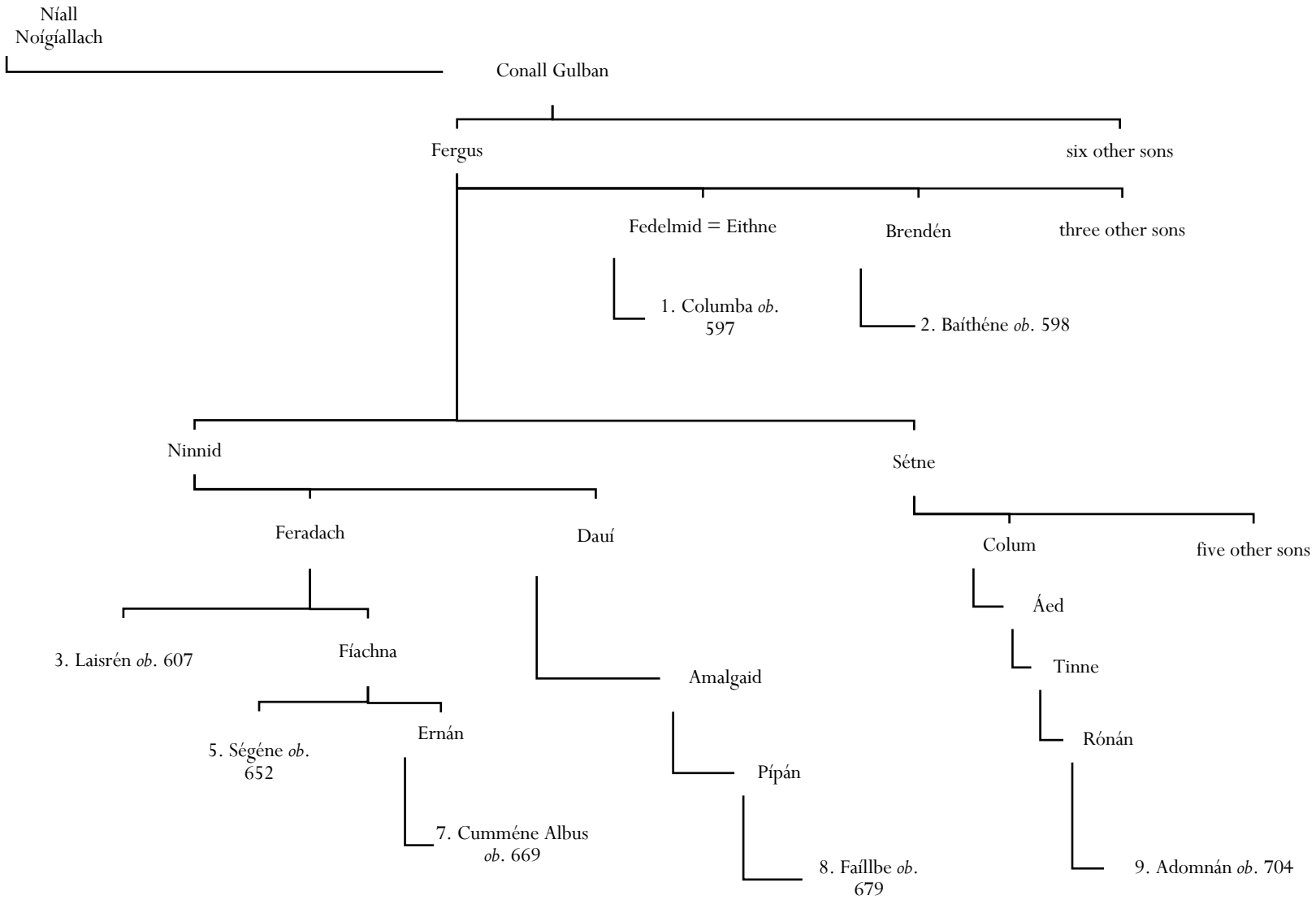


*Figure 1. The Cenél Conaill and the abbots of Iona.*

Very little is known about Columba's mother Eithne, but her father's name was Mac Naue meaning 'son of a boat' (perhaps foreshadowing Columba's own love of sailing).[14] More information exists for his early life and education. He was fostered by a priest named Cruithnechán, before continuing his education as a deacon in Leinster under the pupillage of a man called Gemmán.[15] His final teacher's name was written in three forms: Finnio, Findbarr, and Vinniau.[16] All three, from the British and Irish words for 'white', clearly referred to the same man.[17] This teacher has been equated with either Finnian, the founder of the monastery of Clonard, or Findbarr the founder of the monastery of Movilla.[18] The consensus seems to have shifted towards Findbarr of Movilla, and that he was not only the tutor of Columba but an intellectual working in the same circle as Gildas, and writing work that influenced the monk Columbanus who brought his thinking to the continent.[19] These

[14] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Tiugraind Beccáin*, ed. and trans. Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1995), §19; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 290-1; *VC*, §pref.1.
[15] *VC*, §§ii.25, iii.2.
[16] *VC*, §§i.1, ii.1, iii.4.
[17] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 210.
[18] The debate surrounding his identity, and his ethnicity, is extensive: James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical. An Introduction and Guide* (Dublin, 1966), §§72, 165, 183 (pp. 240-1, 374-6, 390-1); Pádraig Ó Riain, 'St. Finnbarr: A Study in a Cult', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 82:2 (1977), pp. 63-82; Léon Fleuriot, 'Le «Saint» Breton *Winniau* et le Pénitentiel Dit «de *Finnian*»?', *Études Celtiques*, 15:2 (1978), pp. 607-14; David Dumville, 'Gildas and Uinniau', in Michael Lapidge and David Dumville (eds.), *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge, 1984), pp. 207-14; Pádraig Ó Riain, 'Finnian or Winniau', in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds.), *Irland und Europa: Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter = Ireland and Europe: The Early Church* (Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 52-7; Pádraig Ó Riain, 'Finnio and Winniau: A Question of Priority', in Roland Bielmeier and Reinhard Stempel, with René Lanszweert (eds.), *Indogermanica et Caucasica: Festschrift für Karl Horst Schmidt zum 65. Geburtstag* (Berlin, 1994), pp. 407-14; David Dumville, 'St Finnian of Movilla – Two Studies: 1. St Finnian of Movilla: Briton, Gael, Ghost?', in Lindsay Proudfoot (ed.), *Down: History and Society. Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 71-81; Pádraig Ó Riain, 'Finnio and Winniau: A Return to the Subject', in John Carey, John T. Kock, and Pierre-Yves Lambert (eds.), *Ildánach Ildírech: A Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana* (Andover MA, 1999), pp. 187-202; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 291-3. Thomas Owen Clancy has suggested that this Finnian/Finnbarr is the same man as St Ninian, who, according to Bede, some Picts claimed as their apostle: 'The real St Ninian', *Innes Review*, 52:1 (2001), pp. 13-28. For a recent overview with some new suggestions, see Oisín Plumb, *Picts and Britons in the Early Medieval Irish Church: Travels West Over the Storm-Swelled Sea* (Turnout, 2020), pp. 83-101.
[19] The '*Vennianus auctor*' mentioned by Columbanus is taken by many to be Findbarr of Movilla: Columbanus, *Epistulae*, ed. and trans. G.S.M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin, 1957), §i.7; Gildas, *Epistularum Gildae Deperditarum Fragmenta*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom, *Gildas:*

episodes give the historian a sense of Columba's intellectual background,[20] but other evidence is lacking for the first forty years of Columba's life in Ireland.

It was not until Columba's exile that details of his life come into clearer focus. A significant moment seems to have arrived with the battle of Cúl Dreimne in AD 561. This battle was used in sources to date Columba's departure from Ireland,[21] but this has led later authors and scholars to suggest some degree of participation by the saint. The *Chronicle of Ireland* recorded that it was 'through the prayers of Columb Cille' that his Northern Uí Néill kin defeated the Southern Uí Néill king of Tara, Diarmait mac Cerbaill.[22] A later legend had Columba cause the battle after copying a book without permission.[23] Columba's possible participation at Cúl Dreimne has also been linked to a synod held at Tailtiu, modern Teltown Co. Meath, the year after the battle. This synod excommunicated Columba and has been suggested as the cause of the saint's departure to Britain.[24] Tailtiu was also the site of an annual assembly hosted by the king of Tara, the *Óenach Tailten*, and may have been an opportunity for Diarmait to pressure the concurrent synod to excommunicate Columba as revenge against him, or his kin.[25] Máire Herbert has alternatively

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*The Ruin of Britain and Other Works* (London, 1978), pp. 80-2, 143-5; *Penitentialis Vinniani*, ed. and trans. Ludwig Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin, 1975), pp. 3-4, 74-95; Richard Sharpe, 'Gildas as a Father of the Church', in Lapidge and Dumville (eds.), *Gildas: New Approaches*, pp. 196-202; see also above, n. 18.

[20] James Fraser has explored how the tutelage of Findbarr may have influenced Columba's thought and monasticism: *From Caledonia to Pictland. Scotland to 795* (Edinburgh, 2009), pp. 73-80.

[21] *VC*, §§pref.2, i.7.

[22] *AT*, §560.1; *AU*, §561.1; *CS*, §561. This putative source has been reconstructed by modern scholars from its surviving daughter-chronicles: Roy Flechner, 'The Chronicle of Ireland: Then and Now', *Early Medieval Europe*, 21:4 (2013), pp. 422-3; see also below, Chapter One, p. 39 nn. 61-3.

[23] Ó Domhnaill, *Betha Colaim Chille*, §§167-80. For an identification of this book, see Daniel P. Mc Carthy, *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution and History* (Dublin, 2008), pp. 153-67. Maghnas Ó Domhnaill alternatively thought this book was St Columba's *Cathach*, a sixth-century psalter that is our earliest extant Irish illuminated manuscript: *Betha Colaim Chille*, §178; Michael Herity and Aidan Breen, *The Cathach of Colum Cille: An Introduction* (Dublin, 2002), pp. 1-3.

[24] *VC*, §iii.3. On the final sentence of this story, see Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, rev edn (Oxford, 1991), pp. xxx-xxxi, n. 211, and Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 356.

[25] D.A. Binchy, 'The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara', *Ériu*, 18 (1958), pp. 122-3; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 278-81, 556-9.

approached this issue by looking at the earliest source available that described Columba's life, the poem *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, said to be composed just after the saint's death.[26] The poem emphasised that Columba left behind material wealth, honour, and glory in search of salvation.[27] Given his royal connections, and his kin's fighting and politicking, only departing from Ireland would allow him to practise his faith without being drawn into the intrigues of his family; so, setting off from Ireland with his companions,[28] 'a whirlwind blew them in boats over the brine' to Britain.[29]

He came to a small Hebridean island off the west coast of Scotland probably the same year, AD 563, and founded a monastery.[30] The island and medieval monastery are popularly called Iona today but this is certainly a scribe's misreading of the Latinised *Ioua*, substituted for the contemporary Gaelic name of the island written as *Í*.[31] While there have been many theories as to the meaning of the name there is still no definitive answer. Later Irish annals recorded that Iona was granted to Columba by Conall mac Comgaill, king of Dál Riata.[32] Dál Riata was a Gaelic kingdom that straddled the sea between Britain and Ireland, stretching from the coast

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[26] Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 26-8. On the dating of the *Amrae*, see a summary of the evidence and the debate in T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Jacopo Bisagni's *Amrae Coluimb Chille*', *Peritia*, 32 (2021), pp. 266-87; see also the discussion in Chapter Three below, pp. 143-4.
[27] *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §§vi.9-12, vii.20-3.
[28] The list of Columba's twelve companions seems to originate in the sixth or seventh century. That the number is twelve generates immediate doubt as to whether this list is true to Columba's voyage, but Columbanus also departed Ireland with twelve companions: Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani*, trans. Alexander O'Hara and Ian Wood, *Jonas of Bobbio: Life of Columbanus, Life of John of Réomé, and Life of Vedast* (Liverpool, 2017), §i.4; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 19, n. 356.
[29] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Fo Réir Choluimb*, ed. and trans. Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, §14: *curchaib tar sál sephtus cló*.
[30] This date comes from a combination of annalistic entries and subtracting the years of Columba's mission from the supposed date of his death: Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, p. xxviii; *AU*, §§563.4, 595.1; Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, p. 27; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 12, n. 395; *VC*, §§pref.2, iii.22-3. *Cf.* Mc Carthy, 'The Chronology of Saint Columba's Life', pp. 4-6, 13-17, 27-9.
[31] For a history of Iona's name, with its earliest written forms, see Gilbert Márkus, 'Í > IOUA > IONA' , Iona's Namescape: Place-names and their Dynamics in Iona and its Environs (1 Jul. 2022), https://iona-placenames.glasgow.ac.uk/i-ioua-iona/ (28 May 2025).
[32] *AU*, §574.2; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 295-9; Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 28-9; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 16-19, n. 79; *VC*, §i.7.

of modern Co. Antrim to the Ardnamurchan peninsula in northern Scottish Argyll.[33] It was a relatively young kingdom; only *c.*100 years had passed since the sons of Erc mac Echdach had crossed the sea from Ireland to gain their territories in western Scotland.[34] This was at the same time that other Irish communities were being founded on the west coast of Britain.[35] This narrative has been contested: some scholars have suggested an earlier prehistoric movement of Gaels from Ireland into Scotland and perhaps a later aristocratic takeover,[36] something hinted at by Bede;[37] others have argued for no movement at all, stressing the longstanding cultural unity of this sea-linked province;[38] or perhaps the pre-historic movement of peoples came

[33] John Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada* (Edinburgh, 1974), pp. 1-8, 111-6. On the use of 'Gaelic' as the preferred nomenclature for these people in Britain, see Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Gaelic in Medieval Scotland: Advent and Expansion. Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 167 (2011), n. 7.

[34] This was how the monks of Iona understood the history of Dál Riata. Beccán mac Luigdech, a seventh-century Ionan poet (see further discussion below, Chapter Three, pp. 144-5), in his *Tiugraind Beccáin* saw Columba as a 'candle' brought to light up *maigne Ercae*, 'Erc's region', *i.e.* Dál Riata: §11; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 293; Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, p. 130-131; Fergus Kelly, '*Tiughraind Bhécáin*', *Ériu*, 26 (1975), p. 92. Archaeological excavations and place-name studies conducted in the past two decades have supported this view: Cormac McSparron and Brian Williams, '"…and they won land among the Picts by friendly treaty or the sword": How a Re-Examination of Early Historical Sources and an Analysis of Early Medieval Settlement in North Co. Antrim Confirms the Validity of Traditional Accounts of Dál Riatic Migration to Scotland from Ulster', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 141 (2011), pp. 145-57; Thomas Owen Clancy, 'The Gaelic Place-Names of the Earliest Scottish Records', in Nancy R. McGuire and Colm Ó Baoill (eds.), *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 6: Papers Read at the Conference Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 6 Held at the University of Aberdeen 23-26 August 2010* (Aberdeen/Obar Dheathain, 2013), pp. 223-45. *Cf.* nn. 38-9 below.

[35] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 158-63; Charles Thomas, *And Shall These Mute Stones Speak? Post-Roman Inscriptions in Western Britain* (Cardiff, 1994), pp. 41-7; *id*., 'The Irish settlements in Post-Roman Western Britain: A Survey of the Evidence', *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, New Series, 6 (1969-72), pp. 251-74; *id*., *Britain and Ireland in Early Christian Times, A.D. 400-800* (London, 1971), pp. 53-67.

[36] Margaret R. Nieke and Holly B. Duncan, 'Dalriada: The Establishment and Maintenance of an Early Historic Kingdom in Northern Britain', in Stephen T. Driscoll and Margaret R. Nieke (eds.), *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 6-11; Richard Sharpe, 'The Thriving of Dalriada', in Simon Taylor (ed.), *Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland 500-1297: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson on the Occasion of Her Ninetieth Birthday* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 49-50.

[37] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 122-4; *HE*, §i.1.

[38] The key work is Ewan Campbell, 'Were the Scots Irish?', *Antiquity*, 75 (2001), pp. 285-92. See also however, David Dumville, 'Ireland and North Britain in the Earlier Middle Ages: Contexts for *Míniugud Senchasa Fher nAlban*', in Colm Ó Baoill and Nancy R. McGuire (eds.), *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 2000: Papers Read at the Conference 'Scottish Gaelic Studies 2000' Held at the University of Aberdeen 2-4 August 2000* (Obar Dheathain/Aberdeen, 2002), republished in his *Celtic Essays, 2001-2007* (2 vols, Aberdeen, 2007), ii, p. 49, 68-9 (all subsequent references are to this edition); *cf*. Clancy, 'Gaelic in Medieval Scotland', pp. 357-8, n. 24.

from Britain into Ireland.[39] What is clear for the period of this thesis' study is that this was a kingdom firmly within the Irish world, and that the sea was the primary infrastructure holding this people together.[40] A seventh-century genealogy and survey of Dál Riata, the *Míniugud Senchasa Fher n-Alban*, pays particular attention to the number of rowers and ships each kindred within the kingdom could muster.[41] The early annals recorded that Dál Riata used this war-fleet both in Ireland and in Scotland, ravaging as far north as Orkney.[42]

There was an alternative account of the monastery's foundation. Bede states that Columba founded his monastery in AD 565, and that it was granted by the Northern Picts as thanks for the saint converting them.[43] This would place Iona in Pictish territory. The Picts, the name given to them by outsiders meaning 'painted' (from the Latin *picti*), were a Brittonic people inhabiting the highlands and eastern portions of modern Scotland, and famous for their battles with the Romans as described in Tacitus.[44] These were the main rivals to the Dál Riata, and just before

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[39] Alex Woolf, 'Ancient Kindred? Dál Riata and the Cruthin' (Self-published, 2012), pp. 1-11; Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 144-9.
[40] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 148-54.
[41] This text and the *Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Riata* also put forward the narrative that the sons of Erc came to western Scotland *c.*AD 500: *Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Riata*, ed. David Dumville, '*Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Riata*', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 20 (2000), p. 181; *Míniugud Senchasa Fher n-Alban*, ed. Dumville, 'Ireland and North Britain', §§2-6, 37, 44, 50-2. The key scholarly discussions on these genealogical texts are those of Dumville cited above; Dauvit Broun, '*Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Ríata* Revisited', in John Carey, Kevin Murray, and Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh (eds.), *Sacred Histories: A Festschrift for Máire Herbert* (Dublin, 2015), pp. 63-72; Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 27-156; and Sharpe, 'The Thriving of Dalriada', pp. 47-61.
[42] *AT*, §733.4; *AU*, §§580.2, 582.1, 719.7.
[43] *HE*, §§iii.4, v.24. On Bede's Pictish sources for this account, see A.A.M. Duncan, 'Bede, Iona, and the Picts', in R.H.C. Davis and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill (eds.), *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 6-10; H.M. Chadwick, *Early Scotland: the Picts, the Scots & the Welsh of Southern Scotland* (Cambridge, 1949), pp. 14, 27-8; Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christianity in Pictland* (Jarrow, 1970), pp. 1-16. A much later date of foundation is given by Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 8-1000* (London, 1984), pp. 99-100; *cf.* Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 16-19.
[44] Tacitus however saw them as another tribe of undifferentiated Britons, *Picti* not coming into common usage until around the third century AD: James Fraser, 'From Ancient Scythia to *The Problem of the Picts*: Thoughts on the Quest for Pictish Origins', in Stephen T. Driscoll, Jane Geddes, and Mark A. Hall (eds.), *Pictish Progress: New Studies on Northern Britain in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 25-7; K.H. Jackson, 'The Pictish Language', in F.T. Wainwright (ed.), *The Problem of the Picts* (London, 1956), pp. 158-60; Nicholas Evans, '*Picti*: From Roman Name to

Columba's arrival, the Pictish king Bruide son of Máelchú had defeated the Gaelic kingdom.[45] While this account of Iona's foundation should not to be preferred to the Irish dating of AD 563 and the donation by the king of Dál Riata, it reflected that Columba's career as a monk in Britain was closely tied to his religious mission to the Picts.[46] Iona was certainly well situated to launch such missionary efforts, being a relatively short sail to the mouth of the Great Glen that connected northern Scotland with the Isles.[47] Memorable stories include Columba throwing open the locked gates of the Pictish fortress upon his arrival with just a touch, his contest with the Pictish wizards, and even the first appearance of the Loch Ness Monster.[48] The *Amrae Coluimb Chille* also talked of Columba's mission:

> [His] blessing conquered the rude mouths
> [of those] who were near the Tay – [it was] the King's wish.[49]

This may show that Columba's mission was not just to Northern Picts, travelling up the Great Glenn to their court near modern Inverness, but to the Southern Picts too, in the east of Scotland.[50] Yet Columba's activities in Scotland did not just extend to his interactions with the Picts. He founded several other monasteries in Dál Riata

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Internal Identity', *Journal of Medieval History*, 48:3 (2022), pp. 291-322; Tactitus, *The Life of Agricola*, trans. Anthony R. Birley, *Tacitus: Agricola and Germany* (Oxford, 2009), §29.

[45] *AT*, §559.3; *AU*, §560.2; *CS*, §560; *cf.* Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 295-296.

[46] The dating discrepancy may in fact arise because the eighth-century Pictish king Nechtan mac Der-Ilei claimed ancestry to the Cenél Comgaill of Dál Riata, and so Bede would have been correct that the ancestors of the Pictish king did grant Iona to Columba: Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Philosopher-King: Nechtan mac Der-Ilei', *Scottish Historical Review*, 83:2 (2004), p. 145. See also above, n. 43.

[47] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 298

[48] *VC*, §§ii.27, ii.33-5. Note that these stories are all linked to the mission up the Great Glen to the Northern Picts and thus may be part of a later tradition: Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, p. 16; James Fraser, 'Adomnán, Cumméne Ailbe, and the Picts', *Peritia*, 17-18 (2003-2004), pp. 183-98; Jacqueline Borsje, 'The Monster in the River Ness in *Vita Sancti Columbae*: A Study of a Miracle', *Peritia*, 8 (1994), pp. 27-34.

[49] *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §§viii.5-6:

> *cloisius borb béolu bendacht*
> *bátar oc Taë – tol Ríg.*

On dating the composition of the *Amrae* later based on this account, see Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, pp. 213-7; *cf.* Charles-Edwards, 'Jacopo Bisagni's *Amrae Coluimb Chille*', pp. 282-3.

[50] *Cf.* Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 97-115. See the discussion below, Chapter Two, pp. 117-18.

under the authority of Iona. The important foundation on the Isle of Tiree called Mag Luinge, 'the field of the ship', was a short sail from Iona.[51]

Columba also returned to Ireland to found more monasteries including Durrow.[52] While in Ireland he came to play a role in high politics, mediating negotiations between the king of Dál Riata and his Uí Néill kin at the Convention at Druim Cett.[53] Even after Columba's death in June AD 597, the achievements and influence of Iona increased.[54] His early abbatial successors continued to grow the family of linked Columban monasteries, starting foundations in both Britain and Ireland, each under their own abbot but connected under the spiritual authority of Iona: their *familia*.[55] Bede explained that,

> [Iona] is accustomed to have a leader who is always a priest and an abbot, to the authority of whom, in an unusual manner, the entire province, even the bishops, are bound as to be subjects.[56]

The abbot's leadership of this federation of monasteries, bishoprics, and churches, including all the lands, buildings, and tenants that came with them, made him one of the most influential actors in Ireland, Scotland, and the wider British Isles. Collectively this jurisdiction is often labelled as a monastery's *paruchia*, and differentiated by some from its *familia* as a proprietary, rather than a socio-religious structure.[57] While there has been a historiographical movement to decentre the power and importance of Iona, especially in Scotland, this *familia* shaped the early insular

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[51] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, nn. 107, 182; *VC*, §§i.30, i.41, ii.15, ii.39, iii.8.
[52] Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 33-5; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 59; *VC*, §i.3; *cf*. *HE*, §iii.4.
[53] *VC*, §§i.10-11, i.49. See also the discussion below in Chapter Two, pp. 112-14.
[54] *VC*, §iii.23; on this date *cf.* Mc Carthy, 'The Chronology of Saint Columba's Life', pp. 5, 20-9.
[55] *AT*, §621.5; *AU*, §§632.4, 635.3; Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 36-46. See also n. 57 below.
[56] *HE*, §iii.4: *Habere autem solet ipsa insula rectorem semper abbatem presbyterum, cuius iuri et omnis prouincia et ipsi etiam episcopi ordine inusitato debeant esse subiecti*.
[57] Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London, 1966), pp. 57-90, esp. 81-90; Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, pp. 291-2. This vision of Ionan and Irish *paruchiae* has been given greater subtlety in subsequent work: Colmán Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland A.D. 650 to 1000* (Naas, 1999), pp. 12-46, 103-30, 172-7, 223-38, 457-65; Richard Sharpe, 'Some Problems Concerning the Organization of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland', *Peritia*, 3 (1984), pp. 230-70, esp. 244-7.

world considerably.[58] The Columban *familia* also produced some of the best sources and artifacts for the early medieval period, including an early chronicle,[59] poetry in both Latin and Old Irish,[60] and famous manuscripts like the Book of Kells:[61] all of these sources are crucial to this study of Iona.

Arguably the most significant daughter house in the Columban monastic *familia* was Lindisfarne, founded *c.*AD 634 in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria.[62] Oswald, the king of Northumbria who sponsored the foundation had spent some of his early years among the Irish in exile, probably in the kingdom of Dál Riata. He would have been familiar with the monks and abbots of Iona who may have baptised him.[63] Iona's monks even claimed that St Columba had appeared to Oswald in a dream before the crucial battle that would deliver him his kingship. Columba came to the king in angelic form, and he echoed the words of God to Joshua before he crossed the Jordan saying, 'Be strong and act manfully. Behold I shall be with you'.[64] Iona

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[58] Gilbert Márkus, 'Iona: Monks, Pastors and Missionaries', in Dauvit Broun and Thomas Owen Clancy (eds.), *Spes Scotorum: Hope of Scots. Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 126-9; James Fraser, 'Strangers on the Clyde: Cenél Comgaill, Clyde Rock and the Bishops of Kingarth', *Innes Review*, 56:2 (2005), pp. 102-20; see also the discussion below, Chapter Four, pp. 228-35.

[59] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 9-26; Isabel Henderson, *The Picts* (London, 1967), pp. 165-8; Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (London, 1972), pp. 117-22; Mc Carthy, *The Irish Annals*, pp. 153-67; T.M. Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, (2 vols, Liverpool, 2006), i, pp. 7-9.

[60] Collected usefully by Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*. See also my discussion below in Chapter Three, pp. 141-7.

[61] The origin of the Book of Kells is debated; the main contenders are Iona, somewhere in Pictland, or among the major Northumbrian monasteries: Donncha MacGabhann, 'Finding Columba in the Book of Kells', in Sofia Evemalm-Graham, with Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus (eds.), *Ì Chaluim Chille: Interdisciplinary Studies on Iona and Columba on the 1500th Anniversary of the Birth of the Saint* (Glasgow, 2025), pp. 185-207; Isabel Henderson, 'Pictish Art and the Book of Kells', in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick, and David Dumville (eds.), *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 79-105; Julian Brown, 'Northumbria and the Book of Kells', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 1 (1972), pp. 219-46; Paul Meyvaert, 'The Book of Kells and Iona', *The Art Bulletin*, 71:1 (1989), pp. 6-19; Victoria Thompson Whitworth, 'The Book of Kells and Eastern Pictland, Revisited', in Evemalm-Graham, with Clancy and Márkus (eds.), *Ì Chaluim Chille*, pp. 161-79. See also below, Chapter Three, pp. 161-2.

[62] *AU*, §632.4. On this entry see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 313-4, n. 157.

[63] *HE*, §iii.3; Hermann Moisl, 'The Bernician Royal Dynasty and the Irish in the Seventh Century', *Peritia*, 2 (1983), pp. 103-26; *VC*, §i.1.

[64] Josh. 1:9; *VC*, §i.1: *Confortare et age viriliter. Ecce ero tecum*.

went on to play a significant part in the Christianisation of the Anglo-Saxon north following this battle, turning the tide for a struggling mission to the English. In the background however, Iona's dating of Easter would come to limit the influence of the Columban *familia*. The Columban monks used an older calculation for the dating of Easter than many of the churches on the continent, meaning that Iona's calculation could be as many as four weeks different.[65] Many churches in Ireland had already begun to switch to the Victorian calculation of Easter.[66] At the Synod of Whitby in AD 664, depicted by Bede as a dramatic confrontation between the bishop of Lindisfarne Colmán, representing the Columban faction, and an upstart abbot of Ripon named Wilfrid, promoting yet a third Easter calculation, that of Dionysius Exiguus, the influence of Iona in Northumbria was on the line.[67] The Northumbrian king's choice of Rome's method (which by this time had embraced the Dionysian Easter) broke the authority Iona had over much of the English Church.

Over twenty years later, and close to two hundred years since the death of Columba, Iona's second most famous abbot tried to reestablish ties with the English

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[65] Summarised by Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 391-415, and by Immo Warntjes, 'The Mechanics of Lunar Calendars and the Modes of Calculating Easter, AD 400-1100: Contexts and Perspectives', *Settimane*, 67 (2020), pp. 273-310. On the computation used by Ireland see especially Daniel P. Mc Carthy and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, 'The "Lost" Irish 84-Year Easter Table Rediscovered', *Peritia*, 6-7 (1987-8), pp. 227-42, reprinted in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Irish History and Chronology* (Dublin, 2003), pp. 58-75; Daniel P. Mc Carthy, 'Easter Principles and a Fifth-Century Lunar Cycle Used in the British Isles', *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 24:3 (1993), pp. 204-24; *id*., 'Sulpicius Severus's Construction of His 84-Year Paschal Table', *Peritia*, 33 (2022), pp. 139-58. On the practical animosities and problems that might arise from this divergence, see Leofranc Holford-Strevens, 'Marital Discord in Northumbria: Lent and Easter, His and Hers', in Immo Warntjes and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (eds.), *Computus and its Cultural Context in the Latin West, AD 300-1200: Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on the Science of Computus in Ireland and Europe, Galway, 14-16 July, 2006* (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 143-58.

[66] The best source for the Irish dispute is the Irishman Cummian's *De Controversia Paschali*, ed. and trans. Maura Walsh and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Cummian's Letter De Controversia Paschali* (Toronto ON, 1988). It was addressed to the abbot Ségéne of Iona, perhaps his nephew the future abbot Cumméne, and very likely the Ionan poet Beccán mac Luigdech too: Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Celtic Poetry*, pp. 129-34; Patrick McAlary, 'Contention after Mag Léne: Identifying the *Paries Dealbatus* in Cummian's Paschal Letter', *Peritia*, 33 (2022), pp. 111-37.

[67] *HE*, §iii.25; Stephen of Ripon, *Vita S. Wilfrithi*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, 1985) §10. This debate was certainly more complicated than the depiction offered by Bede and Stephen of Ripon: E.T. Dailey, 'To Choose One Easter from Three: Oswiu's Decision and the Northumbrian Synod of AD 664', *Peritia*, 26 (2015), pp. 47-64.

Church. Adomnán, abbot of Iona from AD 679 to his death in AD 704, made two journeys to the court of Aldfrith, king of Northumbria, his friend, who he may have studied with or taught as a young man.[68] Little is known about Adomnán's early life: he was born sometime in the 620s in south-west or eastern Co. Donegal, and like the majority of Ionan abbots he was a kinsman of Columba from a branch of the Cenél Conaill.[69] Notably, Adomnán came from the royal branch of the Cenél Conaill that most kings were selected from, which may have played a role in his appointment as abbot.[70] He was one of the most remarkable insular intellectuals of the period and was recognised as such: Bede called him 'a good man, wise, and versed in well renowned knowledge of the scriptures'; and he was one of the few Gaels to be included among 'the illustrious' persons recognised by medieval scholars.[71] On his visit to Aldfrith, Adomnán gave the king a book that he had written describing the pilgrimage of a Gallic bishop named Arculf to the Near East.[72] Bede saw this as a work 'useful to many, and most of all to those who live far from these places where the patriarchs and apostles lived', and for the historian it is one of the first western descriptions of the Levant and the eastern Mediterranean in the wake of the Arab

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[68] *VC*, §ii.46. On Adomnán's journeys to the court of Aldfrith, see Barbara Yorke, 'Adomnán at the Court of King Aldfrith', in Jonathan Wooding *et al*. (eds.), *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker* (Dublin, 2010), pp. 36-50. For Adomnán's education with/of Aldfrith and where, see Alfred P. Smyth, *Celtic Leinster: Towards an Historical Geography of Early Irish Civilization A.D. 500-1600* (Dublin, 1982), pp. 118-22; Colin Ireland, 'Where Was King Aldfrith of Northumbria Educated? An Exploration of Seventh-Century Insular Learning', *Traditio*, 70 (2015), pp. 29-73; Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 47-8, n. 4; *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, ed. and trans. Joan Newlon Radner (Dublin, 1978), §165, pp. 54-5; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 43-6, n. 349.

[69] His place of birth is largely speculation. All that is known from his writing was that he was born in Ireland: *AU*, §§624.2, 704.2; Brian Lacey, 'Adomnán and Donegal', in Wooding *et al.* (eds.), *Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, pp. 20-35; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 43-4; *VC*, §iii.23.

[70] On his appointment as abbot: Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 47-8; Patrick McAlary, 'Early Mechanisms of Abbatial Succession: The Case of Iona (563–704)', *Early Medieval Europe*, 30:1 (2022), pp. 91-100.

[71] *HE*, §v.15: *Erat enim vir bonus et sapiens et scientia scripturarum nobilissime instructus*; Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Adomnán the Illustrious', *Innes Review*, 46:1 (1995), pp. 1-14.

[72] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, ed. and trans. Denis Meehan (Dublin, 1958). The identity of Arculf is something perennially questioned by scholars, see the best expression of this in David Woods, 'Arculf's Luggage: The Sources for Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', *Ériu*, 52 (2002), pp. 25-52; and my further discussion below, Chapter Two, pp. 128-34.

conquests.[73] The abbot went on to promulgate the first law in the Christian West protecting non-combatants in war, known as the *Law of Innocents* or the *Law of Adomnán* (*Lex Innocentium* or *Cáin Adomnáin*), signed by kings and bishops on both sides of the Irish Sea.[74] His hagiography of St Columba is the reason so much is known about Iona's founder, his achievements, and the medieval monastery.[75] Written on the island,[76] Adomnán's *Life of Saint Columba* is divided into three books: the first on the saint's prophecies, the second on the miracles worked through him, and the final book focused on angelic apparitions and heavenly phenomena.[77] It is one of the best windows into the world that these monks lived in, particularly the landscape, geography, and society that surrounded Iona.[78]

In it one can read mundane stories concerning the domestic life of an early medieval monastery, where monks copied manuscripts, sowed crops, and sought out

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[73] *HE*, §v.15: *multis utile et maxime illis, qui longius ab eis locis, in quibus patriarchae uel apostoli erant*. The key monograph on this work is Thomas O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places: The Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the Locations of the Biblical Drama* (London, 2007).

[74] The only critical edition of the *Law of Innocents* is ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer, *Cáin Adamnáin: An Old-Irish Treatise on the Law of Adamnan* (Oxford, 1905), with one by Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha forthcoming. Modern editions and translations include: trans. Gilbert Márkus, *Adomnán's 'Law of the Innocents': Cáin Adomnáin: A Seventh Century Law for the Protection of Non-Combatants* (Glasgow, 1997); trans. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Law of Adomnán: A Translation', in Thomas O'Loughlin (ed.), *Adomnán at Birr, AD 697: Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 53-68; ed. and trans. Pádraig P. Ó Néill and David Dumville, *Cáin Adomnáin and Canones Adomnani* (2 vols, Cambridge, 2003): the edition by Ó Néill and Dumville is used in this thesis. The most recent scholarly contribution to the study of this law is James W. Houlihan, *Adomnán's Lex Innocentium and the Laws of War* (Dublin, 2020). On the kings who signed the law, see Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Guarantor List of *Cáin Adomnáin*, 697', *Peritia*, 1 (1982), pp. 178-215.

[75] The principal editions and translations of Adomnán's *Life of Columba* are: ed. and trans. Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*; trans. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*; ed. William Reeves, *The Life of St Columba, Founder of Hy, Written by Adamnan* (Dublin and Edinburgh, 1857).

[76] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 276; *VC*, §ii.28.

[77] This structure may have been inherited from Gregory the Great's second book of *Dialogues*: Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, trans. Paul Antin, *Grégoire le Grand: Dialogues*, SC 251, 260, 265 (1978, 1979, 1980), §§ii.12-22 (prophecy), ii.23-33 (power), ii.35-7 (departure to the afterlife) (251: pp. 57-60); *id*., trans. Odo John Zimmerman, *Saint Gregory the Great: Dialogues*, FC 39 (New York NY, 1959); Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, p. 138; Jean-Michel Picard, 'Structural Patterns in Early Hiberno-Latin Hagiography', *Peritia*, 4 (1985), pp. 67-82; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Structure and Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', in Wooding *et al.* (eds.), *Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, pp. 205-18; *VC*, §pref.2.

[78] As Aidan MacDonald has rightly said, while 'doubtless many aspects remained unchanged from the mid-6th to the late 7th century, we cannot be sure […] whether we ae being shown Columba's monastery or Adomnán's': 'Adomnán's Monastery of Iona', in Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba*, p. 25.

a local seal-poacher.[79] Adomnán even included personal accounts that reflected the challenges and petty frustrations that came with living on an island and sailing around the Hebrides.[80] Reading stories like these in the *Life of Saint Columba* one is usually struck by the importance of the ocean to the saint's life and to the monastic community he founded. The importance of the ocean to the monks of Iona was certainly what stood out to me when I first picked up Richard Sharpe's translation of the *Life*, starting my interest in this topic, and culminating in this thesis. The centrality of the sea to Iona is not a novel observation however, nor is it surprising. The island of Iona sat within a Scottish archipelago notable for its mountainous terrain that made seaways the easiest mode of movement. The *Life* reflects how important sea-lanes were for moving around this environment and between the monastic houses scattered around its isles.[81] The frequency of sea journeys in the *Life of Columba* has led many to dismiss the notion that this island on the west coast of Scotland was isolated, because this underestimates the power of seaways (the 'monks' highway').[82] Often a portrait of Iona as a well-connected island at the crossroads of the early medieval insular world is evoked instead.[83]

Yet the accounts of ocean movement in the *Life of Columba* show that the relationship the Ionan community had with their environment was more complicated. Thomas O'Loughlin has written on the theological and mental importance that Iona's

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[79] *VC*, §§i.23, i.37, i.41,
[80] *VC*, §ii.45. On the intimate and personal aspects of the *Life of Columba*, see Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Personal, Political, Pastoral: The Multiple Agenda of Adomnán's *Life of St Columba*', in Edward J. Cowan and Douglass Gifford (eds.), *The Polar Twins: Scottish History and Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 41-6, 55-7.
[81] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 148-9.
[82] Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, p. 81.
[83] Ann Hamlin, 'Iona: A View from Ireland', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 117 (1987), p. 17; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 298-9; Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: the Earliest Poetry*, pp. 6-7; E. Mairi MacArthur, *Columba's Island: Iona from Past to Present* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 10-11; Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 76-7, 123; Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 30, 124; Ian Finlay, *Columba* (London, 1979), pp. 103-15; Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, rev edn (Chichester, 2013), p. 32; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 22-4.

ocean location had for the Columban community. He has rightly stressed that the ocean was a force enmeshed in the daily lives of Iona's monks: including its 'sounds and fury'.[84] Moreover, their ocean surroundings shaped how the monks saw themselves in relation to the wider medieval world: their mental geography was defined by Iona's place in the ocean, and its distance from the biblical landscape.[85] Adomnán described Iona as a 'tiny and isolated island of the Britannic ocean'.[86] This fundamental orientation deserves greater appreciation. It should not be dismissed when attempting to understand how the ocean was described and experienced by the *familia* of Iona.[87] The ocean was the very limit of the world, it was inhabited by monsters, and the *Life* provides many examples of violent ocean storms and sea hazards that threatened to drown Columba and his sailors.[88] As well as these accounts, the image of the Ionan monk caught in an endless ocean squall in the poem *Adiutor Laborantium* did a great deal to inspire my interest in the relationship between the early monastic community and its environment:

> I pray that I, a little man
> Shivering and most wretched,
> Rowing through the storm,
> Infinite in this world.[89]

This poem was certainly not boasting about the mastery Iona's monks had over the sea, nor the ease of travel that the ocean facilitated. The *Iona Chronicle* recorded that

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[84] Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Living in the Ocean', in Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba*, pp. 11-23.
[85] Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The View from Iona: Adomnán's Mental Maps', *Peritia*, 10 (1996), pp. 98-122.
[86] *VC*, §iii.23: *hac parua et extrema ociani brittannici commoratus insula*.
[87] O'Loughlin, 'The View from Iona', pp. 112-3, cf. n. 13.
[88] *VC*, §§i.5, i.19, ii.12-13, ii.42.
[89] *Adiutor Laborantium*, ed. and trans. Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, ll. 16-19:
> *Precor ut me hommunculum*
> *Quassatum ac miserimum*
> *Remigantem per tumultum*
> *Saeculi istius infinitum*.

many Ionan monks did not survive this endless storm. Six monks of Iona drowned in a storm of wind on the sixteenth of September AD 691.[90] In AD 749 another entry records members of the Ionan community drowning, and in AD 641 the annals record a shipwreck.[91] The sea was both a force for connection and a dangerous barrier to movement. Attention in the scholarship has so far focused on its connectivity, while this thesis will attend to its limits, hoping to offer a rebalanced view of the ocean.

For the monks of Iona there was an obvious tension between the danger of ocean travel and their frequent use of seaways. This thesis is interested in these kinds of contradictions that occurred at every level of interaction between the ocean and the early medieval monastery. An island community will always be challenged by the behaviour and climate of the ocean, but those effects, and the simple fact of being surrounded by water, necessitated a constant negotiation and adaptation to the ocean environment. The sea could be a powerful tool in adjusting to the significant challenges it created. A focus on the ocean can demonstrate the impact of the environment on the achievements of Iona and can help reevaluate the current historical view of the early medieval monastery; and through Iona, this perspective can contribute to our understanding of the early medieval world.

Structure, Methods, and Historiography

This thesis is divided into two parts, each containing two chapters. The first part focuses on the ocean as a physical force which shaped the geography of Iona, and it explores how the community used the ocean and adapted to it. This is an attempt to lay out the environmental foundations on which Iona's more abstract

[90] *AU*, §691.5.
[91] *AU*, §§641.4, 749.7.

interactions with the ocean were built. Chapter One argues that the ocean was the dominant force shaping the landscape Columba and his companions encountered on their arrival in the Hebrides. This same chapter turns to archaeological reports and climate studies to show how the ocean's behaviour, and changes to it, had consequences for life on Iona, the monastery's food production, and the community's sustainability. The second chapter addresses how Iona's monks used the ocean as a method of movement. The journeys found in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* work as a framing device to show how the social network of the Columban *familia* was shaped and maintained by the ocean. This chapter builds in scale from analysing the local use of seaways, to the insular networks that the monastery maintained, and finally explores if the ocean was a connective force that linked Iona to the wider medieval world. This chapter concludes by emphasising the importance of the local ocean networks that Iona maintained.

The second part of this thesis seeks to understand the socio-cultural impact the ocean had on the Columban *familia*. It begins by surveying the ocean imagery present in the texts ascribed to Ionan authors. To do this, I work through the potential influences that shaped the literature of Iona and show how oceanic themes in the monks' writing connect to, and depart from, classical thought, biblical interpretation, late antique writing, and early Irish literature. By identifying what is characteristic in their treatment of the ocean, this chapter reveals the theological and cultural implications of the sea for the Columban *familia*. Crucially, these implications are shown to be closely linked to the physical environment and social use of the ocean discussed in the first two chapters. Finally, to show that the close relationship between the ocean and Iona is something historically significant, the fourth chapter takes a comparative approach. The island monastery of Iona is compared to the late

antique community of Lérins, island monasticism in Ireland, and island monasticism in Britain. In each case the chapter considers to what extent Iona's relationship with the ocean mirrors other religious communities and the impact of their environment. Yet beyond showing that Ionan island monasticism was unique, and that the community's relationship to the ocean was distinctive, this chapter highlights how the environmental context of the monastery structured the economic and social organisation of Iona.

Overall then, this thesis will observe a similar structure to that pioneered by Fernand Braudel and his division of time: building upwards from geographical time (Iona's climate, geography, and the ocean's role in those) to the community's social and individual time (analysing the ocean-ways used by the community, but also the literary and religious thought of Iona).[92] *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* is inescapable as an influence on this thesis, or any that discusses the sea.[93] Yet sea-studies have developed significantly since Braudel, and a work similarly influential to the field, and to this thesis, was Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea*. It takes on the Mediterranean like Braudel, encapsulating the sea-thought of the twentieth century while also launching a twenty-first century revival: the 'New Thalassology'.[94] A key theme of Horden and Purcell's work, and crucial for this thesis, is that dense seaborne connectivity was linked to the micro-ecological character of the Mediterranean.[95] Other contributions

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[92] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Sîan Reynolds (2 vols, Berkeley CA, 1995), i, p. 21.
[93] David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (London, 2011), pp. xxv-xxvii.
[94] Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000). See also, Edward Peters, '*Quid nobis cum pelago*? The New Thalassology and the Economic History of Europe', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 34:1 (2003), pp. 49-61; and some reflections on the term by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, 'The Mediterranean and "The New Thalassology"', in *eid*., *The Boundless Sea: Writing Mediterranean History* (Abingdon, 2020), pp. 1-21.
[95] Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, esp. pp. 53-88, 115-22, 174-230, 342-400.

to this field, such as the histories of Barry Cunliffe, are more ocean focused.[96] Cunliffe speaks in these of a common Atlantic community, and explores how ocean movement and trade could create distinct socio-religious cultures.[97] Underneath all these studies is the basic 'dialectic' Braudel wanted to appreciate, one that sits at the core of this thesis' argument, between 'space and time (geography and history)'.[98] For Braudel the Mediterranean was a geographical document through which one could understand this dialectic.[99] For this thesis, the ocean geography of Iona is the greatest document available for understanding the medieval history of the Columban community and monastery.

Many of these new sea-perspectives are part of a broader historiographical effort to write histories that are more global, in scale or in voice.[100] Studies of the sea or ocean are even seen as necessarily global.[101] This is particularly true of the Middle Ages which has received substantial attention from scholars.[102] The globalised medieval world is typically a 'sub-global' one, producing histories of Afro-Eurasia driven by human movement and insisting on the mobility of people, things, and ideas.[103] Sea-lanes have often been discussed in these global histories, emphasising the connective power of water and the 'world systems' that can grow from the use of

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[96] Barry Cunliffe, *Europe Between the Oceans. Themes and Variations: 9000 BC – AD 1000* (New Haven CT, 2008); *id*., *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and its Peoples* (Oxford, 2001); *id*., *On the Ocean: The Mediterranean and the Atlantic from Prehistory to AD 1500* (Oxford, 2017).
[97] *E.g.* Cunliffe, *On the Ocean: The Mediterranean and the Atlantic*, pp. 330-6, 399-408.
[98] Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, i, p. 16.
[99] *Ibid*., i, p. 17.
[100] On the many types of global history that can be written, but by no means an exhaustive list, see Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Global History and Historical Sociology', in James Belich *et al.* (eds.), *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 23-43.
[101] Maria Fusaro, 'Maritime History as Global History? The Methodological Challenges and a Future Research Agenda', in Maria Fusaro and Amélia Polónia (eds.), *Maritime History as Global History* (St John's NL, 2010), pp. 267-82.
[102] See Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen (eds.), *The Global Middle Ages*, *Past and Present*, 238, Supplement 13 (2018).
[103] James Belich, John Darwin, and Chris Wickham, 'Introduction', in Belich *et al.* (eds.), *The Prospect of Global History*, pp. 5, 15.

the sail and sailors.[104] Most notably, Janet L. Abu-Lughod offered an alternative vision of a medieval 'world system' controlled by the Muslim Caliphate and centred around the Indian Ocean as a fulcrum that linked the medieval world together.[105] While Horden and Purcell are suspicious of 'world-systems theory' in their own study of the sea,[106] the prominent stress on 'connectivity' in their work speaks to the historiographical and global moment that they were in,[107] and which still exists today (although it is certainly more contested now).[108] This thesis is in some degree a response to this historiographical moment.

Deeper in the method of this thesis is a debt to the early *Annales* school that I share with Braudel. The interdisciplinary approaches those scholars advocated have been key throughout the chapters that follow, mixing geography with history, but also data analysis, climatology, archaeology, theology, and ending the core of the thesis with a cross-temporal and cross-spatial comparative framework.[109] The environmental point of view this thesis takes is however more influenced by the second generation of *Annales* scholars. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie wrote some of the most prominent early work appreciating the significance of the climate to history.[110] His greatest contribution was to ask that historians gather climatic proxies

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[104] Barry K. Gills and Andre Gunder Frank, 'World System Cycles, Crises, and Hegemonic Shifts, 1700 BC to 1700 AD', in *eid*. (eds.), *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* (London, 1993), pp. 153-87; Glen Dudbridge, 'Reworking the World System Paradigm', *Past and Present*, 238, Supplement 13 (2018), pp. 297-316; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (4 vols, Berkeley CA, 2011), i, pp. 15-22, 39-54.
[105] Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250 – 1350* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 352-5.
[106] Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, p. 611.
[107] I note here Paolo Squatriti's identification of 'connectivity' with New Labour's search for new ideologies at the turn of the millennium: 'Review Article: Mohammed, the Early Medieval Mediterranean, and Charlemagne', *Early Medieval History*, 11:3 (2002), pp. 263-79, at n. 10. Peregrine Horden's response should also be noted, 'Afterword', *Postmedieval*, 7:4 (2016), pp. 565-71.
[108] See my further discussion below, Conclusions, pp. 252-4.
[109] Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, 'Contributions à la Théorie et à l'Histoire de la Géographie', *Revue de Synthèse Historique. Nouvelle Série*, 15 (1926), pp. 123-7.
[110] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, 'Aspects Historiques de la Nouvelle Climatologie', *Revue historique*, 225:1 (1961), pp. 1-20; *id*., 'Histoire et Climat', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 14:1 (1959), pp. 3-23; *id*., *Times of Feast, Times of Famine: A History of Climate Since the Year 1000*, trans. Barbara

from multiple sources and combine them with standard documentary material to create not only a more reliable picture of the historical climate and its long-term changes, but also give a 'human face' to the relationship historical actors had with their environment.[111]

Histories that focus on the climate and environment continue to be popular, and this thesis is in dialogue with this growing body of research. This popularity does not come from the above methodological and historiographical developments, but rather perennial concerns about the environment, the changing climate, and particularly the human impact on the natural world which permeates the public consciousness today.[112] A recent special issue of the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* was framed as a response to climate change and extreme weather events.[113] This historiographical perspective which takes aim at the human impact on the natural world is at the core of environmental history, which grew in part out of the American environmentalist movement of the 1960s and 70s but also has deeper roots in the work of nineteenth-century authors like George Perkins Marsh in his *Man and Nature* (1864).[114] In its broadest definition this field focusses on the close interaction

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Bray (London, 1972). He was also drawing on the thinking of other authors, notably responding to the methods of scholars like Gustaf Utterström, 'Climatic Fluctuations and Population Problems in Early Modern History', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 3:1 (1995), pp. 3-47.

[111] Though he stresses that this 'human face' to climate history must come after a rigorous and objective climatic approach, not beforehand, and not intermingled: Le Roy Ladurie, *Times of Feast, Times of Famine*, pp. 7-22.

[112] A recent collection of thought around this topic more broadly is Jakub Kowalewski (ed.), *The Environmental Apocalypse: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Climate Crisis* (Abingdon, 2023).

[113] James Kelly and Tomás Ó Carragáin, 'Introduction: Constructing the History of Climate and Society in Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 120C (2020), pp. i-x.

[114] George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature; Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (New York NY, 1864). For the development of environmental history and environmental thought, see: Andrew C. Isenberg, 'Historicizing Natural Environments: The Deep Roots of Environmental History', in Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (eds.), *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (Malden MA, 2002), pp. 372-89; Andrew C. Isenberg, 'Introduction: A New Environmental History', in *id*. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 1-20; Donald Worster, 'The Vulnerable Earth: Towards a Planetary History', in *id*. (ed.), *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 3-20; J.R. McNeill, 'Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History', *History and Theory*, 42:4 (2003), pp. 5-43; *id*., 'The State of the Field of Environmental History', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 35 (2010), pp. 345-74.

between humanity and the natural world, rather than 'declensionism' – seeking in the past an ecological ideal with which to criticise the present.[115] However, the most renowned contribution to environmental history for the medievalist is Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis'.[116] He linked the medieval Christian worldview with the exploitation of the environment that he saw as characteristic of contemporary western society. Though long criticised since its publication over fifty years ago, White's thesis continues to be cited and deserves recognition for its influence in sparking a great deal of scholarship in response.[117]

Yet a focus on Lynn White does a disservice to the breadth of medieval environmental historiography that has been produced and continues to grow. Contributions to the field in the past few decades include studies on forestry and woodlands;[118] rivers and riverine technology;[119] agricultural change and livestock;[120] the interaction between urban centres and the environment;[121] plagues;[122] and survey

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[115] McNeill adopts a similar definition while also warning against 'declensionism': 'The State of the Field of Environmental History', pp. 347, 359-60.
[116] Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science*, 155, no. 3767 (1967), pp.1203-7.
[117] See the collection of papers in Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson (eds.), *Religion and the Ecological Crisis: The "Lynn White Thesis" at Fifty* (Abingdon, 2017).
[118] Alexander Olson, *Environment and Society in Byzantium, 650-1150: Between the Oak and the Olive* (Cham, 2020); Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore and Landscape* (Woodbridge, 2011); J. Donald Hughes, 'Ancient Deforestation Revisited', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 44:1 (2011), pp. 43-57; Péter Szabó, *Woodland and Forests in Medieval Hungary* (Oxford, 2005).
[119] John Blair (ed.), *Waterways and Canal-Building in Medieval England* (Oxford, 2007); Paolo Squatriti, *Water and Society in Early Medieval Italy* (Cambridge, 1998); Paolo Squatriti (ed.), *Working with Water in Medieval Europe: Technology and Resource-Use* (Leiden, 2000); Richard C. Hoffmann, '*Salmo salar* in Late medieval Scotland: Competition and Conservation for a Riverine Resource', *Aquatic Science*, 77:3 (2015), pp. 355-66.
[120] Arnold Puy and Andrea Luca Balbo, 'The Genesis of Irrigated Terraces in al-Andalus. A Geoarchaeological Perspective on Intensive Agriculture in Semi-Arid Environments (Ricote, Murcia, Spain)', *Journal of Arid Environments*, 89 (2013), pp. 45-56; Jamie Kreiner, *Legions of Pigs in the Early Medieval West* (New Haven CT, 2020); Mark McKerracher, *Farming Transformed in Anglo-Saxon England: Agriculture in the Long Eighth Century* (Oxford, 2018).
[121] Derek Keene, 'Medieval London and its Supply Hinterlands', *Regional Environmental Change*, 12:2 (2012), pp. 263-81; Jason Linn, 'The Roman Grain Supply, 442-455', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 5:2 (2012), pp. 298-321.
[122] Bruce M.S. Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (Cambridge, 2016); Lester K. Little (ed.), *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541-750* (Cambridge, 2006); Monica H. Green, 'The Four Black Deaths', *American Historical*

works of the period itself.[123] All this work reveals the diversity in perspective and approach that defines environmental history as a field, showing how the interaction between ecological and human themes is a rich vein for research; one that is yet to be directly applied to Iona. The environmental scholar that has been most relevant to this thesis is Ellen Arnold, whose major monograph *Negotiating the Landscape* sought to inspire a greater number of medieval case studies to show the real variety of human relationships and thought directed towards the natural world.[124] Compared to the two environmental viewpoints Lynn White allowed for (medieval Christianity stressed dominion over the natural world, the only exception was the thought of St Francis of Assisi),[125] Arnold's study of the Benedictine monks of Stavelot-Malmedy argued that medieval views of the natural world were multifaceted and changing. She showed that communities could hold simultaneous and contradictory ideas about their environment that were developed out of their surroundings as much as imposed on them. This thesis in many ways follows on from the work of Arnold. It provides another case study showing how a medieval monastic community engaged with its surrounding environment, how the monks of Iona thought about the ocean, and how their geographical context shaped their lives, actions, and beliefs.

Yet this thesis seeks to do something more than just be a further case study. Iona's relationship with the ocean can deepen the historical understanding of the monastery and the early medieval Christian view of the natural world, but it was also an environmental bond that can reconfigure some dominant historiographical trends.

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*Review*, 125:5 (2020), pp. 1601-31; Ole Jørgen Benedictow, *The Black Death, 1346-1353: The Complete History* (Woodbridge, 2004).

[123] Most notably John Aberth, *An Environmental History of the Middle Ages: The Crucible of Nature* (Abingdon, 2013), and Richard C. Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2014).

[124] Ellen Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape: Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes* (Philadelphia PA, 2013).

[125] See also, Lisa J. Kiser, 'The Garden of St Francis: Plants, Landscape, and Economy in Thirteenth-Century Italy', *Environmental History*, 8:2 (2003), pp. 229-45.

When studies of the medieval world are pushing more and more to become globalised, human relationships with the ocean and sea-lanes are appreciated above all for their ability to connect, build networks, and offer mobility.[126] The seaways seen in the Ionan sources have consequently been mined for evidence of greater medieval connectivity instead of what they can show holistically.[127] Rather than offering a portrait of the ocean as the 'monks' highway',[128] this thesis will give greater weight to the monk caught in the 'infinite storm' and the sense of isolation and helplessness that the ocean could inspire in these monks living at the edge of the world. For them the ocean was a largely local challenge that had to be negotiated. By offering a vision of Iona that is balanced towards a new appreciation of the local ocean environment, one can also see a vision of the Early Middle Ages that looks more local too.

Richard Sharpe ends the preface to his edition of Adomnán's *Life of Columba* with a look at the island: 'Columba, Adomnán, and his *Life* are all rooted in the island of Iona', an island that 'has a powerful sense of place, which permeates much of Adomnán's' writing.[129] Something that can also be said of the wider Ionan corpus. This thesis is a call to recapture that sense of place in history.

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[126] See especially Jonathan Shepard, 'Networks', *Past and Present*, 238, Supplement 13 (2018), pp. 116-57.
[127] For example, Charles Thomas, '"*Gallici Nautae de Galliarum Provinciis*" – A Sixth/Seventh Century Trade with Gaul, Reconsidered', *Medieval Archaeology*, 34:1 (1990), pp. 1-26; Ian Wood, 'Contact with the Eastern Mediterranean in the Late Merovingian Period', in Stefan Esders *et al*. (eds.), *East and West in the Early Middle Ages: The Merovingian Kingdoms in Mediterranean Perspective* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 291-5.
[128] Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, p. 81.
[129] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. viii.

# CHAPTER ONE

*The Ocean Climate and Agricultural Sustainability*

The small island of Iona sits just off the south-western tip of Mull, one of the largest isles in the Inner Hebrides. Viewed from Mull's shore, the island is low-lying and covered with rocky outcroppings. The largest is Dùn Ì, the island's highest summit. Iona is five-and-a-half kilometres long stretching from its north-east point to its south-west. At its narrowest it measures just one-and-a-half kilometres.[1] For the purposes of this thesis, the Sound that separates Iona from Mull is the island's most significant geographic feature. It is under two kilometres wide and shallow in many places, with shoals and hazardous rocks making it dangerous to boats without local knowledge. Tidal rips rising to two-and-a-half knots can tear away unsuspecting vessels.[2] Many perils dominate this small divide that controls access to the island. Crossing to Iona, in even just moderate winds and slightly disturbed seas, you feel the potential danger of the Sound. The early medieval monks saw this divide as the key environmental gateway that sanctified their island home. One story showed that the monks denied access to someone they felt would pollute their island if they set foot on shore.[3] Other stories show the monks ferrying over more worthy visitors and pilgrims.[4] Aidan MacDonald has noted that Adomnán typically treated those visitors who arrived on Iona under their own sail more favourably than those who shouted for access from the coasts of Mull.[5] Interestingly, to shout across the Sound and be

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[1] It is topographically and geologically more similar to the Outer Hebrides than to Mull: The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), *Argyll: An Inventory of the Monuments* (7 vols, Edinburgh, 1971-1992), Iona, pp. 1-2.
[2] United Kingdom Hydrographic Office, *Admiralty Sailing Directions: South-West Coast of Scotland Pilot [NP66A]*, 2nd edn (Taunton, 2019), pp. 208, 210-11 (§§5.329, 5.340).
[3] *VC*, §i.22.
[4] *VC*, §§i.25-7, i.32.
[5] Aidan MacDonald, 'Aspects of Monastic Landscape in Adomnán's *Life of Columba*', in John Carey, Máire Herbert, and Padraig Ó Riain (eds.), *Saints and Scholars*: *Studies in Irish Hagiography* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 15-18; *VC*, §§i.4, i.30; *cf.* i.22, i.25-7, i.32, i.43.

heard requires a very still day.[6] This inconsistent method of gaining access to Iona may have been the point. It showed that the petitioner had some favour with God that they could be heard over the wind and waves, proving that they should be granted access to Iona's saintly shores.[7] This seemingly small distance between Iona and Mull makes a great deal of difference: it turns Iona into a separate entity, an island surrounded by water, and it forces its inhabitants into a necessary relationship with the ocean.

Arriving on shore, the east coast is rocky but interspersed with white sands. Visually, these beaches would suit a Mediterranean island: the ice-cold crystal water, even in August, would shatter any illusion that it was. They sit below a raised ridge where the inhabitants of Iona, current and historic, have made their homes.[8] Few trees are found outside the village, and this seems to have been the case for most of the island's history.[9] Under the shadow of Dùn Ì, the northeast corner of the island has some of the best pastureland where the land is rolling and green. This part of the island is sheltered from the high winds and sea spray you encounter crossing to the western half of Iona. Here the ground becomes damp and peaty. Marsh gathers in the low ground, while the knolls are covered in pink and purple heather. A machair plain is a reprieve from this landscape travelling down the west coast. Machair grasslands are built on top of rich shell sand and are some of the best agricultural lands on

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[6] MacDonald, 'Aspects of Monastic Landscapes', pp. 17-18; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 126.
[7] On the potential symbolism of shouting across the Sound in Adomnán's mind, see MacDonald, 'Aspects of Monastic Landscapes', p. 18, nn. 5-7.
[8] For a history of the modern community of Iona, see E. Mairi MacArthur, *Iona: The Living Memory of a Crofting Community*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh, 2002).
[9] Samantha E. Jones *et al.*, 'Identifying Social Transformations and Crisis During the Pre-Monastic to Post-Viking Era on Iona', *Environmental Archaeology*, 27:2 (2022), pp. 177-85; Sjoerd Bohncke, 'The Pollen Diagram from Ditch 1', and *id*., 'Pollen Analysis of the Lochan Mor Section', in John W. Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 111 (1981), pp. 346-8, 368-70.

largely waterlogged Hebridean islands such as Iona.[10] The plain is now mostly a golf-course. The beaches on the island's west coast are rockier, and much of the coast is a sheer drop to promontories that passing boats need to steer clear of. The southern uplands look down on the modern town, and out towards Mull and the ocean. Iona's topography is remarkable because of the variety of landscapes that are contained within such a small area. Walking the entirety of Iona at a slow pace took me three days. All the while, be it surrounded by wind-blown heather, trudging through the muddy ground, or seeing the vistas from Iona's highlands, in every landscape, one feels the ocean's hand shaping the life and geography of this island.

This chapter focuses on the natural environment of Iona, observing what effect the ocean had in influencing it and the lives of the Columban monks. Emphasis is given to examining the agricultural sustainability of the early medieval monastery, using the extensive archaeological work done on the island to unpick the diet and farming programme used by the monks. The important role the ocean had in facilitating this programme is a major takeaway of this chapter, but the ocean also defined the climate of Iona. Placed in European, and Scottish contexts, Iona's ocean climate, and changes to it over time, affected the relationship these monks had with their seascape, their island, and the world outside their monastery.

## Iona's Ocean Climate

The North Atlantic Current is the most important environmental force shaping Europe's climate. It carries warm water from the east coast of the Americas

[10] NatureScot, 'Machair' (24 Jun. 2024), https://www.nature.scot/landscapes-and-habitats/habitat-types/coast-and-seas/coastal-habitats/machair (27 Apr. 2025); Stewart Angus, 'De Tha Machair? Towards a Machair Definition', *Scottish Natural Heritage*, https://web.archive.org/web/20220121060749/https://www.nature.scot/sites/default/files/2017-07/B100728 - Machair definition.pdf (27 Apr. 2025); William Ritchie, 'The Meaning and Definition of Machair', *Transactions of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh*, 42:4 (1976), pp. 431-40.

up the Gulf Stream and into the North Atlantic, depositing it on Europe in precipitation, creating weather that is more even year-round.[11] This current is part of what has been called a global system, a 'conveyer', that cycles warm and cold water around the earth, regulating the climate.[12] The North Atlantic Current has gained increased historiographical focus and greater public interest in recent decades due to concerns about rapid anthropogenic climate change.[13] Scotland is more exposed to these Atlantic weather patterns. Compared to most of Europe, even to England, Scotland's summers are damper, it faces stronger westerly winds, and its growing season is shorter.[14] This waterlogged climate has led to the extensive development of the, sometimes-denigrated, peatlands of Scotland, and is at least partially responsible for the decline in tree coverage across the country since prehistory.[15]

The 'oceanicity' of the Scottish climate is essential to understanding life on Iona, both past and present.[16] The weather stations on the islands of Tiree and Colonsay, short sails from Iona, provide useful thirty-year averages of weather data

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[11] Ian Morrison, 'Climatic Changes and Human Geography: Scotland in a North Atlantic Context', *Northern Studies*, 27 (1990), p. 4. This basic and popular model is not accepted by everyone, and the degree to which ocean temperature affects the European climate is still a matter of debate: R. Seager *et al.*, 'Is the Gulf Stream Responsible for Europe's Mild Winters?', *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society*, 128 (2002), pp. 2563-86; *cf.* Peter Rhines, Sirpa Häkkinen, and Simon A. Josey, 'Is Oceanic Heat Transport Significant in the Climate System?', in Robert R. Dickson, Jens Meincke, and Peter Rhines (eds.), *Artic-Subarctic Ocean Fluxes: Defining the Role of the Northern Seas in Climate* (Dordrecht, 2008), pp. 87-109, esp. 91-100. Overall, the popular model seems to hold true: Jaime B. Palter, 'The Role of the Gulf Stream in European Climate', *Annual Review of Marine Science*, 7 (2015), pp. 113-37.

[12] Wallace S. Broecker, 'Was the Medieval Warm Period Global?', *Science* 291, no. 5508 (February 2001), p. 1499; *id*., *The Great Ocean Conveyor: Discovering the Trigger for Abrupt Climate Change* (Princeton NJ, 2010).

[13] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *The Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate* (Cambridge, 2022), pp. 3-35; Matt McGrath, Mark Poynting, and Justin Rowlatt, 'Climate Change: World's Oceans Suffer from Record Breaking Year of Heat' (8 May 2024), https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-68921215 (11 Jun. 2025).

[14] Morrison, 'Scotland in a North Atlantic Context', pp. 4-5.

[15] Kevin J. Edwards, 'Human Impact on the Prehistoric Environment', in T.C. Smout (ed.), *Scotland Since Prehistory: Natural Change and Human Impact* (Aberdeen, 1993), pp. 17-26; Richard Tipping, 'Blanket Peat in the Scottish Highlands: Timing, Cause, Spread and the Myth of Environmental Determinism', *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 17:9 (2008), pp. 2098, 2110.

[16] Morrison, 'Scotland in a North Atlantic Context', p. 4.

that can help decipher what the Ionan climate looks like over any given year.[17] Precipitation is constant on both islands, with rainfall occurring just under two-hundred days a year.[18] The United Kingdom Hydrographic Office has recorded an even higher number of rainy days, at just under to two-hundred-and-fifty.[19] Most rain comes in the half-year between September and February, all months where over one-hundred-and-twenty millimetres falls on average.[20] Even in the spring and summer, between one-half and one-third of the days have some precipitation.[21] The Hydrographic Office has also recorded average wind speeds and directions collected at the Tiree weather station. Winds are mostly westerlies, and, like with rainfall, it was during the winter that the Hebrides saw the most extreme conditions: an average of fifty gales occur per year, most falling between October and March.[22] It is rare that there are winds and sea states below five and six on the Beaufort scale: 'fresh breeze' with 'moderate seas'; and 'strong breeze' with 'rough seas' respectively.[23] That scale-seven conditions also remain common throughout the year, 'near gale' level winds and 'rough to very rough' seas, is significant. Early twentieth-century fishing boats would not put to sea in winds above scale six, and an absolute limit of

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[17] These remain, however, imperfect proxies. Tiree certainly had a very productive microclimate: see below, pp. 72-3.
[18] Met Office, 'Colonsay: Location-Specific Long-Term Averages (1991-2020)', https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/climate/maps-and-data/location-specific-long-term-averages/gcgx400us (27 Apr. 2025) ; Met Office, 'Tiree: Location-Specific Long-Term Averages (1991-2020)', https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/climate/maps-and-data/location-specific-long-term-averages/gf517mw0k (27 Apr. 2025).
[19] UK Hydrographic Office, *South-West Coast of Scotland Pilot*, p. 37 (§1.142).
[20] 'Colonsay: Location-Specific Long-Term Averages (1991-2020)'; 'Tiree: Location-Specific Long-Term averages (1991-2020)'.
[21] *Ibid*.
[22] UK Hydrographic Office, *South-West Coast of Scotland Pilot*, p. 37 (§1.142).
[23] Met Office, 'Beaufort Wind Force Scale', https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/guides/coast-and-sea/beaufort-scale (27 Apr. 2025); UK Hydrographic Office, *South-West Coast of Scotland Pilot*, p. 37 (§1.142).

scale five for sea travel has been seen as reasonable for pre-modern sailing craft.[24] These intense weather patterns define life in the Hebrides.

The North Atlantic Current also has significant regional effects on the climate of Scotland. Whereas the west coast bears the wind and rain lashing the shoreline, the Scottish Highlands shield much of the east.[25] The Highlands, what Adomnán called the *Dorsum Brittannicum*, the 'Spine of Britain', were portrayed as essentially dividing the two coasts of Scotland and its peoples.[26] This may have contributed to the cultural and political divide between the Brittonic Picts on the east side of the Highlands, and the Gaels on the west.[27] What is often now described as a divide between Lowland and Highland Scotland has for much of its pre-modern history been an east-west divide resulting from this geography.[28] The climatic result is a larger patch of farmable land on the eastern side of the country compared to the west.[29] The early western coastal communities of Scotland were backed up against the Scottish mountains, looking outwards to the ocean and exposed to that climatic force.[30] Raised beach platforms among the lochs and isles, and the patches of machair were their most agriculturally viable land.[31] An aerial survey conducted of Scottish land cover found that 24% of Scotland was made up of 'agricultural land', overwhelmingly situated in the east (see *Map 1*).[32] Southern Finland and Sweden,

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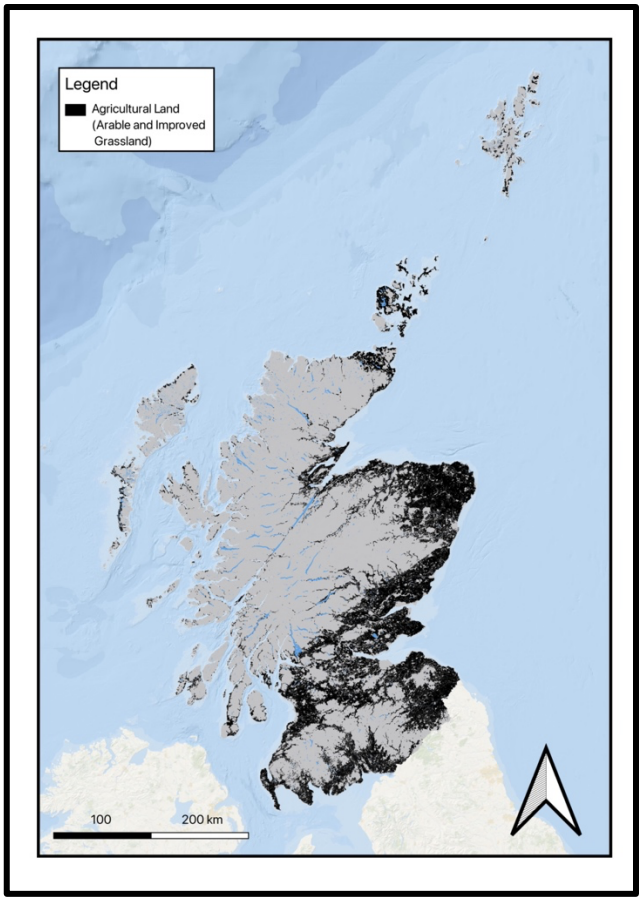
[24] Sean McGrail, 'Cross-Channel Seamanship and Navigation in the Late First Millennium BC', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 2:3 (1983), p. 300.
[25] Morrison, 'Scotland in a North Atlantic Context', pp. 4-5.
[26] *VC*, §§i.34, ii.31, ii.42, ii.46, iii.14.
[27] Campbell, 'Were the Scots Irish?', pp. 290-1. Though Picts probably also resided north of the Ardnamurchan peninsula in Columba's abbacy: Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, nn. 147, 347; *VC*, §i.33.
[28] Ian Morrison, 'Geology and Landscape', in Michael Lynch (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History* (Oxford, 2007), p. 261; Vere Gordon Childe, *The Prehistory of Scotland* (London, 1935), p. 4.
[29] Morrison, 'Scotland in a North Atlantic Context', pp. 4-5.
[30] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, p. 148.
[31] Childe, *The Prehistory of Scotland*, pp. 7-8.
[32] As defined by 'improved pastureland' and 'arable land': Macaulay Land Use Research Institute, *The Land Cover of Scotland 1988: Executive Summary* (Aberdeen, 1993), p. 15. That definition should be questioned: *cf.* Leslie Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests in Northern Britain AD 550-850* (Edinburgh, 2003), pp. 19-21; Piers Dixon, 'Hunting, Summer Grazing and

despite their cold and snowy winters, have a far better zone of agricultural productivity than all of Scotland.[33] This seems to have been the case throughout history. Comparing the early medieval kingdom of Dál Riata, where Iona was based, to contemporary Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and territories, its lands supported about one fifth of the population of the South Saxons, about one twentieth the population of Mercia, and only just more than the Isle of Wight.[34]




*Map 1. Scottish agricultural land in 1988.*[35]

Settlement: Competing Land Use in the Uplands of Scotland', in Jan Klápšte and Petr Sommer (eds.), *Medieval Rural Settlement in Marginal Landscapes* (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 27-31.

[33] Martin L. Parry, *Climatic Change, Agriculture, and Settlement* (Folkstone, 1978), pp. 82-5; Morrison, 'Scotland in a North Atlantic Context', pp. 4-5.

[34] James Fraser uses the *Míniugud Senchasa Fher n-Alban* to calculate Dál Riata's households in parallel with Anglo-Saxon 'hides' as collected in Bede and the *Tribal Hidage*: *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 349-52. Richard Sharpe has noted that most of the low-lying land, that land more likely to be agriculturally productive, sat in the territories of the Cenél nGabráin and the Cenél Comgaill (though the map shows that the Cenél nOengussa also had a substantial area of productive land): 'The Thriving of Dalriada', p. 51.

[35] *Land Cover Scotland 1988*, Copyright Scottish Government, contains Ordnance Survey Data © (2025): https://spatialdata.gov.scot/geonetwork/srv/api/records/7dfaf8ce-2123-4eec-8a16-2e85fab7077d?language=all (16 Jun. 2025).

However, drawing a comparison between the modern climate and the experience of early medieval Iona is not so straightforward. The long-term climatic changes of the past two millennia certainly affected the climate experienced by the Columban community. Recent research has focused on the Dark Age Cold Period (DACP), the cool climate between the fifth and eighth centuries, that preceded the Medieval Warm Period (MWP).[36] Crucially, this period of climate cooling was mostly defined by a change in ocean behaviour and the role of the North Atlantic Current through the process of North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO).[37] In periods dominated by a positive NAO state, like today and during the MWP, Europe experiences wetter winters, warmer summers, and more-even seasons; in negative states of NAO, cool wet summers, paired with cold and dry winters are common.[38] Storminess in Europe also seems to change: while storms are more frequent in positive NAO states, they are more intense in negative states.[39] Recent research has brought a greater degree of understanding to the pre-modern climate, but has also complicated this basic vision.[40] By situating Iona's history in this contested vision, the island's early medieval climate can be better understood.

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[36] These broad climatic shifts were largely defined by the work of H.H. Lamb: *Climate, History and the Modern World*, 2nd edn (London, 1995), pp. 149-52, 156-65; *id*., 'The Early Medieval Warm Epoch and its Sequel', *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology*, 1 (1965), pp. 14-17, 34-5.

[37] Samuli Helama, Phil D. Jones, and Keith R. Briffa, 'Dark Ages Cold Period: A Literature Review and Directions for Future Research', *The Holocene*, 27:10 (2017), pp. 1602-3; Valérie Trouet *et al.*, 'Persistent Positive North Atlantic Oscillation Mode Dominated the Medieval Climate Anomaly', *Science* 324, no. 5923 (April 2009), pp. 79-80.

[38] Helama, Jones, and Briffa, 'DACP: A Literature Review', pp. 1602-3; Trouet *et al.*, 'Positive NAO Dominated the Medieval Climate Anomaly', pp. 79-80.

[39] Valérie Trouet, James D. Scourse, and Christoph C. Raible, 'North Atlantic Storminess and Atlantic Meridional Circulation During the Last Millennium: Reconciling Contradictory Proxy Records of NAO Variability', *Global and Planetary Change*, 84-85 (2012), pp. 48-55.

[40] Helama, Jones, and Briffa, 'DACP: A Literature Review', p. 1600; Malcolm K. Hughes and Henry F. Diaz, 'Was There a "Medieval Warm Period", and if so, Where and When?', *Climate Change*, 26 (1994), pp. 109-11.

One of the most recent and influential studies on the first-millennium climate has focused on an event termed the Late Antique Little Ice Age (LALIA).[41] Though part of the larger trend of climate cooling in the DACP, this subperiod seems to have accelerated a cooling European climate into one of steep decline.[42] The LALIA is to be differentiated from the more popularly known early modern Little Ice Age (LIA): the colder climate that is likely to have persisted from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth. Importantly however, the climatic features of both Little Ice Ages are broadly identical (dominant negative NAO state, and a drop in mean average temperatures).[43] Judging from tree-ring data from the Austrian Alps and the Russian Altai-Sayan Mountains, there appears to have been a sudden drop in temperature starting around AD 536.[44] This was the first year in a series of three that coincided with major volcanic eruptions which contributed to the cooling of the early medieval climate. Witnesses of this year recorded a cloud of volcanic ash as a 'dry fog' blocking out the sun.[45] This first major eruption occurred around March and was probably from a North American volcano. The second eruption was later in AD 539

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[41] Ulf Büntgen *et al.*, 'Cooling and Societal Change During the Late Antique Little Ice Age from 536 to Around 660 AD', *Nature Geoscience*, 9 (2016), pp. 231-6; Ulf Büntgen *et al.*, 'Global Wood Anatomical Perspective on the Onset of the Late Antique Little Ice Age (LALIA) in the Mid-6th Century CE', *Science Bulletin*, 67 (2022), pp. 2336-44.

[42] Büntgen *et al.* have however argued that LALIA should replace DACP as the preferred terminology: 'Reply to "Limited Late Antique Cooling"', *Nature Geoscience*, 10 (2017), p. 243; *cf.* Samuli Helama, Phil D. Jones, and Keith R. Briffa, 'Limited Late Antique Cooling', *Nature Geoscience*, 10 (2017), pp. 242-3.

[43] For the debate as to whether this Ice Age existed, see: Morgan Kelly and Cormac Ó Gráda, 'The Waning of the Little Ice Age: Climate Change in Early Modern Europe', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 44:3 (2014), pp. 301-25; *eid*., 'Debating the Little Ice Age', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 45:1 (2014), pp. 57-68. *Cf.* Sam White, 'The Real Little Ice Age', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 44:3 (2014), pp. 327-52; Ulf Büntgen and Lena Hellmann, 'The Little Ice Age in Scientific Perspective: Cold Spells and Caveats', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 44:3 (2014), pp. 353-68.

[44] Büntgen *et al.*, 'Cooling and Societal Change During the LALIA', pp. 231-2. Büntgen *et al.*'s more recent study of 23 forest sites in both hemispheres have supported their earlier claim: 'Global wood Anatomical Perspective on the Onset of the LALIA', pp. 2340-3. For a database of 692 climate proxies that cover the common era: PAGES2k Consortium, 'A Global Multiproxy Database for Temperature Reconstructions of the Common Era', *Scientific Data*, 4, 170088 (2017).

[45] Bailey K. Young, 'Climate and Crisis in Sixth-Century Italy and Gaul', in Joel D. Gunn (ed.), *The Years Without Summer: Tracing A.D. 536 and its Aftermath* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 35-7; Cassiodorus, *Variae*, trans. S.J.B. Barnish, *Selected Variae of Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator* (Liverpool, 1992), §xii.25 (pp. 179-81).

or 540, and the final eruption was smaller, but not insignificant, occurring around AD 547.[46] The average European summer temperature dropped between 1.6 and 2.5 °C; the effects of this drop have been likened to the consequences of a nuclear winter.[47] Immediate European food shortages, the Justinianic plague, and massive migrations have been associated with the onset of the LALIA, but the climate effects were far reaching.[48] The closeness of the LALIA to the foundation of Iona may be significant; it certainly set the scene for the climate challenges Columba and the early community faced when establishing their monastery.

Based on the tree-ring data from the Austrian Alps, three of the ten coldest decades in western Europe for the past two millennia occurred between AD 500 and AD 700, and the climate does not seem to have recovered until the eighth century.[49] Climate proxies closer to Iona seem to support this cooling and show that these events would have shaped the monastery's regional climate. Dendrochronological evidence from northern Ireland and lowland Scotland show a response to the volcanic event in AD 536.[50] Bog samples taken from the bottom of Loch Sunart, not far away from Mull, show a drop in water temperatures around AD 500 that may confirm a shift to a negative NAO state, and a cooling climate in response to the volcanic eruptions after AD 536.[51] A study of stalagmites from Roaring Cave near

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[46] Büntgen *et al.*, 'Cooling and Societal Change During the LALIA', p. 232; Michael Sigl *et al.*, 'Timing and Climate Forcing of Volcanic Eruptions for the Past 2,500 Years', *Nature*, 523 (Jul. 2015), pp. 547-8.
[47] Peter N. Peregrine, 'Social Resilience to Nuclear Winter: Lessons from the Late Antique Little Ice Age', *Global Security: Health, Science and Policy*, 6:1 (2021), pp. 57-8; Sigl *et al.*, 'Climate Forcing of Volcanic Eruptions', p. 547.
[48] Büntgen *et al.*, 'Cooling and Societal Change During the LALIA', pp. 234-5.
[49] *Ibid*., Figures 2b and 4b, pp. 233-4.
[50] Anne Crone, 'The Development of an Early Historic Tree-Ring Chronology for Scotland', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 128 (1998), pp. 485-93, note that the chronology from Buiston does not correlate with this event; M.G.L. Baillie, 'Dendrochronology Raises Questions About the Nature of the AD 536 Dust-Veil Event', *The Holocene*, 4:2 (1994), pp. 212-17.
[51] Do however note the caution with which Alix G. Cage makes these connections: 'The Modern and Late Holocene Marine Environments of Loch Sunart, N.W. Scotland' (PhD Thesis, University of St Andrews 2006), pp. 334-9.

Ullapool, on the west coast of Scotland and north of Iona, verifies a shift to a dominant negative NAO state that seems to have persisted from the start of the LALIA until the eighth century.[52] Across the 'Spine of Britain', near the River Spey, samples from a peat bog show a shift to wetter conditions in the sixth century too.[53] It should be noted that there are variations between these proxies, likely in response to local factors, and that even when larger sets of proxies nearby in Ireland are collated and analysed together, they still come to uncertain conclusions about sixth-century climatic changes and weather conditions.[54] All these proxies provide is a broad-brush portrait of the climatic changes faced in the vicinity of early medieval Iona: from the foundation of Iona until the abbacy of Adomnán, and the eventual eclipse of the monastery's influence, the monks faced a climate in which the summers were colder and wetter, while the winters, while also colder than average, may have also been drier than the climate today.[55] These climate changes had both an immediate and long-term impact on the monastery and the surrounding society.

In the immediate aftermath of this dip in temperature, crop failures would have struck the societies of northern Europe hard.[56] At similar northern latitudes, in Scandinavia and the Baltic for example, scholars have drawn a close link between

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[52] Andy Baker *et al.*, 'A Composite Annual-Resolution Stalagmite Record of North Atlantic Climate Over the Last Three Millennia', *Scientific Reports*, 5:10307 (2015), pp. 1-8; Helama, Jones, and Briffa, 'DACP: A Literature Review', pp. 1602-3. Note that Baker *et al.* see a persistent positive NAO state as socially destabilising. It should be remembered that the labels 'negative' and 'positive' belie the actual trade-offs that come with shifts in the NAO, and that the benefits of a positive state of NAO may come with societal pressures too.

[53] Anthony Blundell and Keith Barber, 'A 2800-Year Paleoclimatic Record from Tore Hill Moss, Strathspey, Scotland: The Need for a Multi-Proxy Approach to Peat-Based Climate Reconstructions', *Quaternary Science Review*, 24 (2005), pp. 1272-4.

[54] Even if these proxies synchronise more than would be expected by 'chance alone': Graeme T. Swindles *et al*., 'Centennial-Scale Climate Change in Ireland During the Holocene', *Earth-Science Reviews*, 126 (2013), pp. 300-20.

[55] Dana F.C. Riechelmann and Marjolein T.I.J. Gouw-Bouman, 'A Review of Climate Reconstructions from Terrestrial Climate Archives Covering the First Millennium AD in Northwestern Europe', *Quaternary Research*, 91 (2019), pp. 125-8.

[56] Matthew Toohey *et al.*, 'Climatic and Societal Impacts of a Volcanic Double Event at the Dawn of the Middle Ages', *Climatic Change*, 136 (2016), pp. 408-10.

this cooling climate, to changes in agricultural programmes, massive declines in population, and the abandonment of settlements.[57] For medieval Iona, the wetness and decrease in average temperature would have had serious consequences for the island's agricultural productivity and that of its surrounding territory. Using evidence from the early modern LIA, Martin L. Parry has argued that even a slight cooling of the climate dropped the upper altitudinal limit for cultivating oats by eighty-five metres in Scotland, one of the hardiest crops and resistant to damp.[58] Luckily, Iona still sat below this limit, but the increased precipitation and persistent negative NAO state that came with climate cooling (common to both the LIA and LALIA) would have decreased the arable output of even lowland sites. Turning again to evidence from the early modern LIA, and to the Hebrides in particular, rental records from islands nearby Iona such as Tiree show that the combination of adverse weather and high intensity storms led to the abandonment of many townships in the late seventeenth century.[59] The 'oceanicity' of the Hebridean climate, and the exposure these western isles faced to these powerful Atlantic weather patterns, meant sea-

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[57] Bo Gräslund and Neil Price, 'Twilight of the Gods? The "Dust Veil Event" of AD 536 in Critical Perspective', *Antiquity*, 86 (2012), pp. 428-43; Manon Bajard *et al.*, 'Climate Adaptation of Pre-Viking Societies', *Quaternary Science Reviews*, 278 (2022), 107374, pp. 1-11.

[58] Parry, *Climatic Change, Agriculture, and Settlement*, pp. 101-5, 112-22; Martin L. Parry, 'Climate Change and the Agricultural Frontier: A Research Strategy', in T. Wigley, M. Ingram, and G. Farmer (eds.), *Climate and History. Studies in Past Climates and Their Impact on Man* (London, 1983), pp. 325-35; Martin L. Parry and Timothy R. Carter, 'The Effect of Climatic Variations on Agricultural Risk', *Climatic Change*, 7 (1985), pp. 95-10; Martin L. Parry, 'Secular Climatic Change and Marginal Agriculture', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 64 (1975), pp. 1-13; Morrison, 'Scotland in a North Atlantic Context', p. 2. For some criticism of Parry and of 'marginality', see Althea L. Davies, 'Upland Agriculture and Environmental Risk: A New Model of Upland Land-Use Based on High Spatial-Resolution Palynological Data from West Affric, NW Scotland', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 34 (2007), pp. 2053-63; Richard Tipping, 'Cereal Cultivation on the Anglo-Scottish Border During the "Little Ice Age"', in Coralie M. Mills and Geraint Coles (eds.), *Life on the Edge: Human Settlement and Marginality* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 1-11; *id*., 'Climate Variability and "Marginal" Settlement in Upland British Landscapes: A Re-Evaluation', *Landscapes*, 3:2 (2002), pp. 10-29. Seen another way however, marginality was omnipresent: Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, p. 180.

[59] Robert A. Dodgshon, 'The Little Ice Age in the Scottish Highlands and Islands: Documenting its Human Impact', *Scottish Geographical Society*, 121:4 (2005), pp. 330-2; *id*., *No Stone Unturned: A History of Farming, Landscape and Environment in the Scottish Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2015), pp. 82-8.

spray, sand blown inland, as well as the general increase in precipitation severely damaged crops, agricultural land, and even farm buildings.[60]

Similar effects of this cool climate can be seen in early medieval sources like the *Chronicle of Ireland*.[61] These annals record events and deaths, but they also give significant attention to matters of the weather. What makes the *Chronicle of Ireland* useful for the study of Iona's climate and its effects is that the Hebridean monastery was the likely home for the first centuries of the chronicle's compilation.[62] The *Iona Chronicle* recorded events beginning soon after the arrival of Columba and his monks on Iona in *c.*AD 563, before being moved to Ireland *c.*AD 740.[63] It should be

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[60] Based on the evidence, it is high intensity storms, rather than frequent storms, that are recorded more in the historiographical and scientific records, and do the most damage to these island communities: Alastair G. Dawson *et al.*, 'Historical Storminess and Climate "See-Saws" in the North Atlantic region', *Marine Geology*, 210 (2004), pp. 247-59; David D. Gilbertson *et al.*, 'Sand-Drift and Soil Formation Along an Exposed North Atlantic Coastline: 14,000 Years of Diverse Geomorphological, Climatic and Human Impacts', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 26 (1999), pp. 439-69; Dodgshon, 'The Little Ice Age in the Scottish Highlands and Islands', pp. 330-2; Lisa C. Orme *et al.*, 'Aeolian Sediment Reconstructions from the Scottish Outer Hebrides: Late Holocene Storminess and the Role of the North Atlantic Oscillation', *Quaternary Science Reviews*, 132 (2016), pp. 15-25; M.J.C. Walker, 'A Pollen Diagram from St Kilda, Outer Hebrides, Scotland', *New Phytologist*, 97:1 (1984), pp. 99-113; Maline E. Kylander *et al.*, 'It's in Your Glass: A History of Sea Level and Storminess from the Laphroaig Bog, Islay (Southwestern Scotland)', *Boreas*, 49:1 (2020), pp. 152-67; Trouet, Scourse, and Raible, 'North Atlantic Storminess: Reconciling Contradictory Proxy Records', pp. 48-55;

[61] In this thesis I follow the standard dating used by T.M. Charles-Edwards in his *Chronicle of Ireland*, and only include events contained in his edition (for the justification of his choices, see: i, pp. 1-2); *cf.* Daniel P. Mc Carthy, 'The Chronology of the Irish Annals', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 98C (1998), pp. 203-55; *id*., *The Irish Annals*, pp. 342-54; *id*., 'The Irish Chronicles and their Chronology': https://publications.scss.tcd.ie/kronos/chronology/synchronisms/ (27 Apr. 2025).

[62] Alfred P. Smyth, 'The Earliest Irish Annals: Their First Contemporary Entries, and the Earliest Centres of Recording', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy,* 72C (1972), pp. 33-43; Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 9-26; Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, pp. 2-7; Eoin Mac Neill, 'The Authorship and Structure of the "*Annals of Tigernach*"', *Ériu*, 7 (1914), 80-81; Flechner, 'The Chronicle of Ireland: Then and Now', p. 425; Francis J. Byrne, 'Seventh-Century Documents', *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 108 (1967), pp. 178-9; Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 115-28; Nicholas Evans, *The Present and the Past in Medieval Irish Chronicles* (Woodbridge, 2010), p. 2; Thomas O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1957), p. 255. Daniel P. Mc Carthy has a view that diverges from the existing scholarship but agrees with most on the period compiled at Iona: *The Irish Annals*, pp. 61-117, 150-2; restated with some differences in 'The Genesis and Evolution of the Irish Annals to AD 1000', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 52:1 (2018), pp. 119-55; *cf.* Nicholas Evans, 'Review: *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution and History*', *The Medieval Review* (2009); T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Review: *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution and History*', *Studia Hibernica*, 36 (2009-2010), pp. 207-10.

[63] Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, i, p. 8; McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, pp. 61-117; and Smyth, 'The Earliest Irish Annals', pp. 33-43. Bannerman and Hughes, in contrast, viewed contemporary annal recording to have begun in the late seventh century: Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, p. 25; Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 117-18, 142-4.

said however, that these annal entries are not all necessarily recorded at Iona or regarding its weather. Many reference locations in Ireland. They are simply another imperfect proxy for the regional climate.

In AD 720 the *Iona Chronicle* recorded that the summer was rainy, the year before it had been dry.[64] Both negatively impacted agricultural output.[65] Back-to-back years of climate extremes were particularly dangerous to subsistence farmers. After one bad year, you might able to consume some of your reserves and recover them in the next harvest, but two or more successive years of extreme weather could compound effects and harm future years of productivity.[66] The AD 719 entry that noted a dry summer, along with entries in AD 589 and 714 recording hot summers and droughts, are also a reminder that even a period that is predominately cold and wet did not prohibit there being years of extreme heat.[67] It was however a period of intense cold: four snowfalls occurred over this period in AD 588, 635, 670, and 748.[68] The destructive effect of these snowfalls is revealed by the AD 748 chronicle entry, a year which also had a summer drought, where snow and cold are said to have killed off large numbers of cattle in Ireland: cows typically grazed outdoors no matter the season, and there seems to be no Irish tradition of haymaking or stabling during winter.[69] These snowfalls, potentially because of the cattle mortalities, were also linked to famines such as in AD 670, or caused human deaths directly like in AD 635. One of the most serious climatic threats to the community of Iona seen in the

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[64] *AU*, §§719.10, 720.1.
[65] This is seen in the entries at *AU*, §§773.4, and 1107.6.
[66] Parry and Carter, 'The Effect of Climate Variation on Agricultural Risk', pp. 97-9.
[67] *AU*, §§589.3, 714.6, 719.11. Some have interpreted the chronicle recording another drought in AD 664 (§664.1), I think some kind of astrological event is more likely given the context of an eclipse in the same entry: *cf.* Thomas R. Kerr, Graeme T. Swindles, and Gill Plunkett, 'Making Hay While the Sun Shines? Socio-Economic Change, Cereal Production and Climatic Deterioration in Early Medieval Ireland', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 36 (2009), p. 2873.
[68] *AU*, §§588.4, 635.4, 670.1, 748.3.
[69] Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 46-8; *HE*, §i.1.

*Chronicle* seems to have come from storms. The year after the monks arrived on Iona they recorded that a great gale occurred, followed by a series of others in the late seventh-century.[70] The last of this group shows the particular danger Iona saw in these storms: in late autumn 'a great wind drowned some six of the community of Iona'.[71] In AD 749 a similar entry records a 'great wind' followed by 'a drowning of the community of Iona'.[72] A number of other drownings were recorded in the annals for AD 622, 676, 733, and 737, all of which have been used to show the particular maritime interest of these annals, and to strengthen the evidence for their compilation on Iona.[73] One can add to this list a shipwreck and possible drowning of Ionan monks in AD 641, and a shipwreck of Picts in AD 729.[74]

Scholars have used the Irish annals as proxies for early medieval changes in the climate, and the possible social and agricultural impacts these changes had. Daniel Mc Carthy has argued that early chronicle entries recording famine, disease, and the resulting social upheaval, reveal the impact of fifth-century volcanic eruptions, and demonstrate that the Irish annals are a contemporary and accurate climate record for the first half of the sixth century.[75] The extent of this disruption has even been quantified into indexes of societal disruption, or societal resilience to climatic changes.[76] M.G.L. Baillie has also connected the climate deterioration of the sixth century with the rapid spread of Christianity throughout Ireland: in the face of famine, plagues, darkness, and cold, early Christians were able to claim these

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[70] *AU*, §§564.1, 658.3, 685.1, 691.5.
[71] *AU*, §691.5: *Ventus magnus .x.ui. Kl. Octimbris quosdam vi ex familia Iae mersit*.
[72] *AU*, §749.6-7: *ventus maghnus*; *dimersio familie Iae*.
[73] *AT*, §733.4; *AU*, §§622.2, 676.3, 737.2; Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 9-26.
[74] *AT*, §729.2; *AU*, §641.4.
[75] Mc Carthy, *The Irish Annals*, pp. 159-62.
[76] Peter N. Peregrine, 'Climate and Social change at the Start of the Late Antique Little Ice Age', *Holocene*, 30:11 (2020), pp. 1643-8; *id*., 'Social Resilience to Climate Change During the Late Antique Little Ice Age: A Replication Study', *Weather, Climate, and Society*, 12:3 (2020), pp. 561-73; *id*., 'Social Resilience to Nuclear Winter', pp. 57-67.

disasters had biblical precedents, and could convince their neighbours that their paganism was at fault.[77] The mid-sixth-century climate may have also contributed to a major shift in Irish settlement organisation: the rath, a flat ringfort made from a ditch and earthen-bank enclosure, proliferated.[78] Cows also became the primary social and economic currency in Irish society.[79] Finbar McCormick has tied the increase in the social and economic value of cows, because of the importance of dairying to the Irish diet, to spread of raths as defensive structures against a growing number of cattle raids.[80] The value cattle, and of dairy as a food source, may have risen because the cool wet climate made arable agriculture increasingly unreliable. Seeing the rise of raths as 'defensible' structures to protect families and livestock against an increase in climate-caused social unrest is just one explanation.[81] Rath building has otherwise been connected to the effects of the Justinianic plague,[82] the transformative impact of Christian social values,[83] or simply people seeking to manage private and public space.[84]

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[77] M.G.L. Baillie, 'Patrick, Comets, and Christianity', *Emania*, 13 (1995), pp. 74-6.
[78] Aidan O'Sullivan *et al*., *Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400-1100: The Evidence from Archaeological Excavations* (Dublin, 2013), pp. 64-77; Kerr, Swindles, and Plunkett, 'Making Hay While the Sun Shines?', pp. 2869-70; Lisa Coyle McClung and Gill Plunkett, 'Cultural Change and the Climate Record in Final Prehistoric and Early Medieval Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 120C (2020), pp. 156-8; Thomas R. Kerr and Finbar McCormick, 'Statistics, Sunspots and Settlement: Influences on Sum of Probability Curves', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 41 (2014), pp. 493-501.
[79] Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 27-66.
[80] Finbar McCormick, 'Cows, Ringforts and the Origins of Early Christian Ireland', *Emania*, 13 (1995), pp. 33-7.
[81] On the defensibility of raths, see David Keys, *Catastrophe: An Investigation into the Origins of the Modern World* (London, 1999), pp. 176-83; James Lyttleton and Michael A. Monk, 'Sites, Social Change and Warfare in the Second Half of the First Millennium A.D.: A Reappraisal', in Conleth Manning (ed.), *From Ringforts to Fortified Houses: Studies on Castles and Other Monuments in Honour of David Sweetman* (Bray, 2007), pp. 10-11; *cf.* J.P. Mallory and T.E. McNeill, *The Archaeology of Ulster from Colonization to Plantation* (Belfast, 1991), pp. 196-200.
[82] Chris Lynn, 'Settlement and Disease: A Plague on All Your Raths', *Archaeology Ireland*, 19:4 (2005), pp. 14-17.
[83] Harold Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland* (London, 1992), pp. 43-8.
[84] Aidan O'Sullivan and Tríona Nicholl, 'Early Medieval Settlement Enclosures in Ireland: Dwellings, Daily Life and Social Identity', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 111C (2011), pp. 63-7.

I will hazard some speculation as to how the climatic downturn of the mid sixth century provides some of the context for the departure of Columba from Ireland and the foundation of Iona by synthesising some of the above suggestions. The climate cooling of the LALIA and the concurrent plagues in Ireland are argued to have increased social conflict, political violence, and raiding: the Uí Néill in particular may have taken advantage of these environmental crises to expand.[85] At the same time, Christianity was gaining traction in Ireland, potentially in response to the environmental crisis.[86] It not only offered converts a new ideology of individuality before God, but led early Christians and churchmen to seek spaces separated from the pagan world: for the layman, this might be a rath; for the churchman or church-family, this might be an isolated site away from the pagan secular world.[87] The desires of lay-individuality, church isolation, and protection from environmental or social distress could of course combine; a tradition exists that St Colmán and his monks sought out an island monastery to escape the plague.[88] Even more fundamental, the building of raths to distinguish between public space and private space parallels the construction of monastic topography to distinguish

[85] Keys, *Catastrophe*, pp. 176-83; Lynn, 'A Plague on All Your Raths', pp. 14-17; McCormick, 'Cows, Ringforts and the Origins of Early Christian Ireland', pp. 33-7; O'Sullivan *et al*., *Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400-1100*, pp. 74-7.
[86] Baillie, 'Patrick, Comets, and Christianity', pp. 74-6.
[87] Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 43-8, 60-73; *cf.* Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape, AD 400–1100* (Cork, 2021), pp. 58-63, and the discussion in Chapter Four, pp. 215-18. Individuality may be incorrect here. Plague and other pathogens could have unconsciously led Ireland to become more intensely collectivist at this time, maybe even more religious, as part of a 'behavioural immune system' focused on smaller groups of kin and a more introverted society. Nucleated settlements, interest in dividing spaces, and cultural closeness may result from this, with interesting implications for society today: Randy Thornhill and Corey L. Fincher, *The Parasite-Stress Theory of Values and Sociality: Infectious Disease, History and Human Values Worldwide* (Cham, 2014), pp. 153-5, 204-5, 260-1; You-Hai Lu *et al.*, 'Understanding Regional Mobility Resilience and its Relationship with Regional Culture During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Pathogen-Stress Theory Perspective', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 339 (2022), no. 130621.
[88] *Preface to The Hymn of St Colman mac Ui Cluasaigh*, in *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, ed. and trans. John H. Bernard and Robert Atkinson (2 vols, London, 1898), i, p. 25, ii, pp. 12-13.

between the holy and the secular.[89] Everything points to the sixth century being both an environmentally and ideologically significant moment. Máire Herbert has argued that the best reasoning one can provide for Columba leaving Ireland for Iona was the desire to avoid his Uí Néill kins' fighting, and his Christian desire to escape the secular world.[90] Underneath both these desires may have been the deep currents of environmental change shaped by the ocean's behaviour.

There has however been pushback on making these connections between social-historical effects and changes in the climate. Even the long-accepted periodisation of preindustrial climate warming and cooling have come under recent criticism.[91] More pointedly, the extensive variability (temporal, regional, and even the data within individual studies) seen in the climate proxies and historical evidence has been pointed out, questioning the reliability of any conclusions that are made using these sources. Rather than creating simplistic equations between climate change and, often, negative societal effects, scholars are now calling for a more rigorous methodology to guide climate histories.[92] In the case of the social changes seen in Ireland above, while major climate events could have had a catastrophic impact on society, there was no total social collapse, rather people adapted and created new social systems.[93] Scholars might offer stories of resilience to climate changes, or fundamental continuity in the face of apparent change.[94] What story does the climate of early medieval Iona tell?

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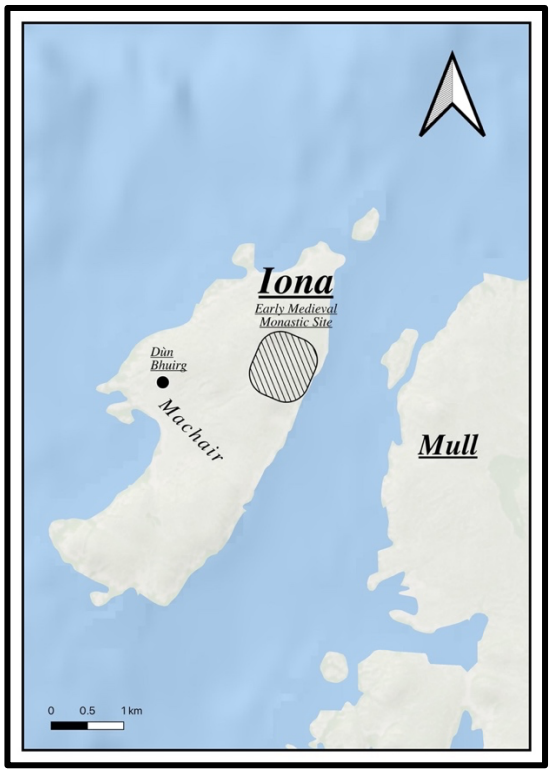
[89] David Jenkins, *'Holy, Holier, Holiest': The Sacred Topography of the Early Medieval Irish Church* (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 81-103; O'Sullivan and Nicholl, 'Early Medieval Settlement Enclosures in Ireland', pp. 63-7.
[90] Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 26-8.
[91] Raphael Neukom *et al*., 'No Evidence for Globally Coherent Warm and Cold Periods Over the Preindustrial Common Era', *Nature*, 571 (2019), pp. 550-4.
[92] Dagomar Degroot *et al*., 'Towards a Rigorous Understanding of Societal Responses to Climate Change', *Nature*, 591 (2021), pp. 539-50.
[93] McClung and Plunkett, 'Cultural Change and the Climate Record', pp. 157-8.
[94] Degroot *et al*., 'Towards a Rigorous Understanding of Societal Responses to Climate Change', pp. 542-7.

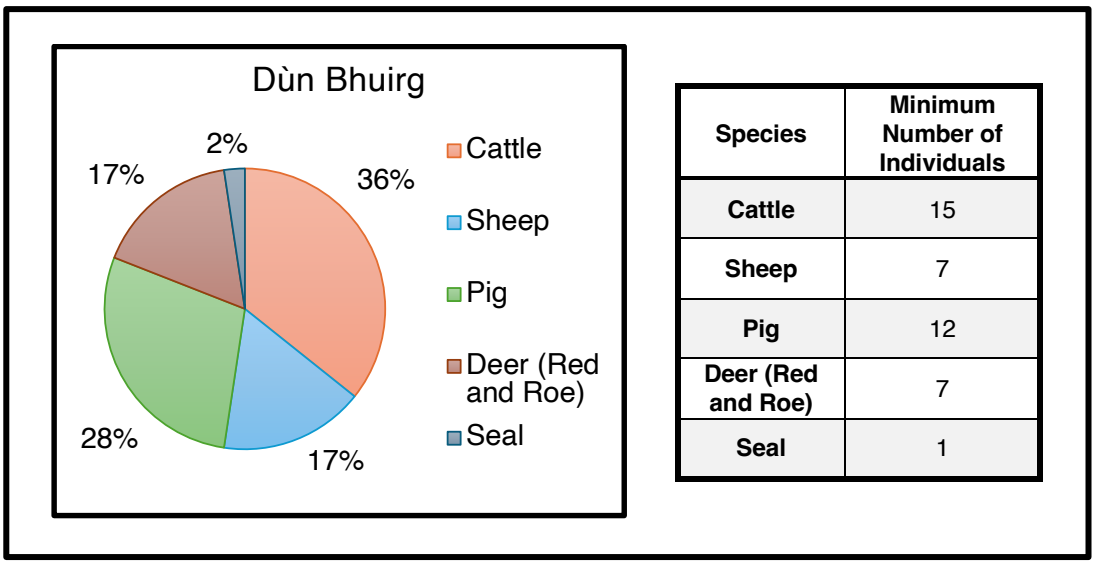
The evidence points to a period of cold and wet weather in the region of Iona that dominated the period from the community's foundation until the turn of the ninth century. This is clear, but it should inform the understanding of the medieval monastery rather than drive any analysis of it. The ocean had a primary role in shaping the climate of Iona and the Hebrides; while the cooling climate may have exacerbated the already high yearly precipitation and intensified storms, the 'oceanicity' of life on Iona has persisted across all the climatic shifts of the past two millennia. Turning now to the archaeological evidence from the island and to the agricultural programme of the early medieval monastery, low-resolution climate proxies can be left behind. This evidence better illuminates how the monks engaged with their geography and climate, revealing the close relationship the monks had with the ocean.

Diet and Agricultural Programme




*Map 2. Iona's Iron Age and Early Medieval sites of occupation.*

Columba and his companions were not the island's first settlers. Pollen samples and artifacts show that Iona has been inhabited, at least intermittently, since the Mesolithic period.[95] The raised beaches on the east coast of Iona, and the machair plain on the west, were some of the best patches of arable land for Neolithic settlers in Scotland, and would have attracted early farming of the island.[96] When compared to neighbouring isles, the fertility of Iona's soils brought about surprise even in the early modern period.[97] The Iron Age hill fort at Dùn Bhuirg, occupied between *c.*AD 100 and *c.*AD 300 is the clearest evidence for the island's immediate use before the arrival of Columba and his monks.[98] Sitting above the machair plain on the west coast of the island, the fort looked out towards the ocean. This hill fort is useful in comparison with the early medieval archaeological evidence.




| Species | Minimum Number of Individuals |
|---|---|
| Cattle | 15 |
| Sheep | 7 |
| Pig | 12 |
| Deer (Red and Roe) | 7 |
| Seal | 1 |

*Figure 2. Faunal record of Dùn Bhuirg, after Barbara Noddle.*[99]

[95] Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', pp. 352-5; Bohncke, 'Pollen Analysis of the Lochan Mor Section', pp. 368-70.
[96] Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', pp. 287, 352.
[97] *An Account of the Island of Icolumbkill, Taken in April 1771*, ed. Richard Sharpe, 'Iona in 1771: Gaelic Tradition and Visitors' Experience', *Innes Review*, 63:2 (2012), p. 180.
[98] J.N. Graham Ritchie and Alan M. Lane, 'Dun Cul Bhuirg, Iona, Argyll', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 110 (1978-80), p. 209.
[99] Barbara Noddle, 'Animal Bone from Dun Cul Bhuirg, Iona', in Ritchie and Lane, 'Dun Cul Bhuirg, Iona, Argyll', p. 226.

When compared to Iron Age forts on other Hebridean isles, the material produced by Dùn Bhuirg pales in comparison: it produced only 190 fragments of bone compared to the 1384 and 1307 at forts on Tiree and Skye.[100] This paucity might be due to decomposition; Iona's soils make preservation difficult.[101] That many loose teeth survive without associated skulls is a sign of severe decay.[102] The occupants of the hill fort seem to have had a mainly pastoral agricultural programme. As seen from the above table, cattle are the most numerous species in the bone record, followed by sheep, and together make up over half of the animals consumed. What is surprising is that 47% of the animals consumed by the fort (pig, deer, and seal) were species which would have been sourced from off the island.[103] Pigs would have needed more space and forest cover to graze and forage than was present on Iona. The pigs in the bone record were probably fattened off island before being slaughtered and transported to Iona.[104] Deer also needed more space and woodland cover. They too would have been hunted off island and then brought to Iona. Ionan sources show that the seals consumed could be hunted off the coast of Mull.[105] A portion of the hill fort residents' diet also seems to have included the collection of marine molluscs (limpets, winkles, and whelks), and the hunting of shorebirds like gulls and fulmar.[106] All these could have been sourced from the shorelines of Iona or nearby. Whereas the dominance of cattle and sheep in the faunal record might signal

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[100] Noddle, 'Animal Bone from Dun Cul Bhuirg', p. 226.
[101] *Ibid*.; Finbar McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', in Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', pp. 313-14.
[102] Noddle, 'Animal Bone from Dun Cul Bhuirg', p. 226.
[103] *Ibid*.; Finbar McCormick, 'Iona: The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', in Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba*, pp. 57-8. Recent small finds seem to support this general picture: Derek Alexander, 'Port Ban', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland / A'Lorg Agus A'Claddach an Albainn*, 9 (2008), p. 40.
[104] *VC*, §ii.23.
[105] *VC*, §i.41
[106] Don Bramwell, 'Report on Bones of Birds', in Richard Reece, *Excavations in Iona, 1964-1974* (London, 1981), p. 46; F.R. Woodward, 'Marine Molluscs from the Monastic Midden and Dun Bhuirg', in Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, p. 49.

an efficient sedentary occupation of Iona during the Iron Age, the need to import a substantial amount of the food consumed suggests either a different kind of occupation, or that the diet of the occupants had to be supplemented with outside resources.[107]

There is very little evidence for cereal cultivation, or any other arable agriculture, during Iona's Iron Age occupation. Two shards of pottery have impressions in the shape of what might be a glume of barley.[108] Whereas some pollen samples have shown trace amounts of cereal pollen, others have shown none.[109] Dùn Bhuirg's lack of cereal production, the small sample of animal bone found, the eating of shore birds, and the opportunistic collection of molluscs, all might combine to suggest that this was a site of fringe subsistence.[110] Yet one set of radiocarbon dates indicates that a section of the early medieval monastic enclosure was built on top of a pre-existing Iron Age embankment.[111] Other excavations have discovered samples of Roman pottery from the first or second century AD at the site.[112] The pre-Columban human presence on Iona was not insignificant. Perhaps Iona was a high-status feasting site that was only occupied intermittingly in the later Iron Age, maybe

[107] McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', p. 318.
[108] C.A. Dickson, 'Grain Impressions and Charcoal Identification', in Ritchie and Lane, 'Dun Cul Bhuirg', pp. 224-5; Jones *et al.*, 'Social Transformations and Crisis on Iona', p. 183.
[109] See Jones *et al.*, 'Social Transformations and Crisis on Iona', pp. 170-1, 183, for a summary, and for the inconsistent evidence for arable activity; N. Balaam, 'The Valum', in Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, pp. 12-13; Richard Tipping, 'Palynology of the Peat Profile Buried Beneath the Vallum Bank in Area 4', in Finbar McCormick, 'Excavations at Iona, 1988', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 56 (1993), pp. 93-4; R.G. Scaife and G.W. Dimbleby, 'Landscape Change on Iona', *Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology*, 27 (1990), pp. 41-2, 48.
[110] Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, p. 49.
[111] McCormick, 'Excavations at Iona, 1988', pp. 102-4: calibrated at 95% likelihood, sections were constructed between 40 BC – AD 220, and AD 245 – AD 505. More recent excavations have rejected this dating based on new radiocarbon samples: Ewan Campbell and Adrián Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem "At the Ends of the Earth": Interpreting Charles Thomas's Excavations at Iona Abbey, 1956-63', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 100 (2020), pp. 52, 61.
[112] J.N. Dore, 'Pottery', in Finbar McCormick, 'Early Christian Metalworking on Iona: Excavations Under the "Infirmary" in 1990', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 122 (1992), p. 212.

during certain seasons.[113] What is unclear is how the fort at Dùn Bhuirg and the east-coast monastic embankment and pottery were related; maybe more surprising still is that Iona seems to have been abandoned around AD 300 and was left untouched until the arrival of Columba and his monks.[114]

When Columba arrived on Iona *c*.AD 563, he would have faced serious challenges in sustaining a community. Based on the dating of Columba's voyage used by Adomnán, departing Ireland in late May or early June, Richard Sharpe has reckoned that if the saint and his companions stayed just a few weeks at the court of Dál Riata before they were granted the island, they would have missed the planting season. In this case, they would have needed to rely on supplies provided by the Dálriatan king, or others, for at least the first year.[115] Even after this period of outside reliance, the early monastic community seems to have continued to have a low agricultural impact on their island. The pollen record shows minimal evidence for land clearing, not much early cereal production, and a low level of pastoral agriculture, suggesting that the community had a small number of animals grazing freely.[116]

Scholars have been wary of calculating the number of inhabitants on Iona once the monastery had been fully established. Adomnán names twenty monks at the time of St Columba in his *Life*, but this number surely increased by the time the author had taken up the abbacy.[117] The vision of the monastic community of Iona

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[113] The archaeological assemblage is not dissimilar to a seasonal feasting site on the west coast of Ireland at Doonloughan: Emily Murray and Finbar McCormick, 'Doonloughan: A Seasonal Settlement Site on the Connemara coast', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 112C (2012), pp. 111-14.
[114] Scaife and Dimbleby, notably, disagree: 'Landscape Change on Iona', p. 48. *Cf.* with the pollen evidence collected in n. 109 above.
[115] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 19-21, n. 395; *VC*, §§iii.22-3. This of course assumes that Columba was granted Iona in *c*.AD 563, not later: see above, Introduction, pp. 7-10.
[116] Jones *et al.*, 'Social Transformations and Crisis on Iona', pp. 16-17; *cf*. Bohncke, 'The Pollen Diagram from Ditch 1', pp. 346-8, and *id*., 'Pollen Analysis of the Lochan Mor Section', pp. 368-70.
[117] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 74.

provided by Adomnán does not seem to include any lay workers, but rather the monks themselves labouring in the island's fields and pastures.[118] Lay pilgrims and other guests seem to be given supervised access, and could stay as visitors from a few days to a year, but the island's shore seems to be a crucial monastic boundary for the monks.[119] While some scholars will follow me in accepting the vision provided by Adomnán,[120] others, more sceptical, believe some lay community must have been present on Iona, at least for specialised work.[121] In any case, the monastery's quick growth is shown in pollen samples and the archaeological record. Starting in the early sixth century, a major decrease in the amount of scrub and heath cover was paired with a rise in pollen signals for animal husbandry and the practice of arable farming with cereals.[122] The monastic enclosure, the earthen bank *vallum*, also expanded at this time to contain the growing community.[123] Yet as the monastery began to grow, and turning to look at the evidence for the monastery's diet, one can see a continued pattern of food imports that mirrored Iona's Iron Age agriculture

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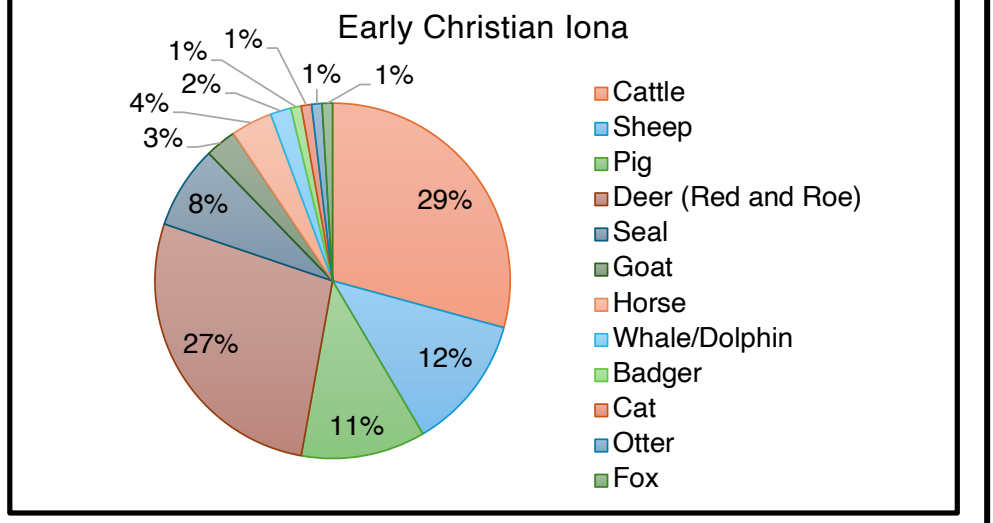
[118] *VC*, §§i.37, ii.28-9, iii.23.
[119] *VC*, §§i.4, i.25-7, i.30, i.32; cf. i.22, iii.23. The pilgrims who sought to attach themselves to the monastery for a year (§i.32) seem to have been an exceptional case, perhaps because of the distance travelled. Those present who 'wondered greatly' at Columba's demand that the pilgrims took the monks' vow, did so because it showed a lack of hospitality, rather than because it was the norm for long-term visitors to avoid the vow: *cf*. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 144.
[120] I am following the view of Aidan MacDonald here: 'Adomnán's Monastery of Iona', pp. 24-44, note esp. 32-33; *id*., 'Aspects of Monastic Landscape', pp. 15-30. See also the recent article by Gilbert Márkus, 'You Won't Get Better: Healing and Enclosure in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', in Evemalm-Graham, with Clancy and Márkus (eds.), *Ì Chaluim Chille*, pp. 69-83.
[121] For instance, T.M. Charles-Edwards has argued that Iona housed specialised sailors and navigators for the many voyages seen in the *Life*: 'Iona and the Sea', in Evemalm-Graham, with Clancy and Márkus (eds.), *Ì Chaluim Chille*, pp. 7-9. Gilbert Márkus (on *VC*, §iii.23) has left open the possibility of 'lay brothers', or a distinct class of working monks living on the island: 'Four blessings and a funeral: Adomnán's theological map of Iona', *Innes Review*, 72:1 (2021), pp. 5-6, n. 13. Recently, a predominately female gravesite on Iona, thought to be late medieval, has been reassessed. The bone of one individual was dated to the island's early monastic occupation. This may signal a lay community, or potentially a community of women-religious – more work on this site is forthcoming: 'Place name record 4034: "An Eala"', *Iona's Namescape* (Glasgow, 2025), https://iona-placenames.glasgow.ac.uk/map/#13.5/56.3363/-6.4128/code/tileDefault/labelsOff/browse/nameCurrent%7CA/record/4034 (20 Sep., 2025); RCAHMS, *Argyll*, Iona, p. 244.
[122] Jones *et al.*, 'Social Transformations and Crisis on Iona', pp. 16-18; Bohncke, 'The Pollen Diagram from Ditch 1', in Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', pp. 346-7.
[123] Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', pp. 356-7.

dynamics. This offers new insights into the relationship between the ocean and the sustainability of the medieval monastery.




| Species | Minimum Number of Individuals |
|---|---|
| Cattle | 31 |
| Sheep | 13 |
| Pig | 12 |
| Deer (Red and Roe) | 29 |
| Seal | 8 |
| Goat | 3 |

| Species | Minimum Number of Individuals |
|---|---|
| Horse | 4 |
| Whale/Dolphin | 2 |
| Badger | 1 |
| Cat | 1 |
| Otter | 1 |
| Fox | 1 |

*Figure 3. Faunal record of Early Christian Iona, after McCormick (1997).*[124]

The cow was the most prevalent species in the early medieval bone record. Adomnán's *Life of Columba* shows that cows were milked and slaughtered on Iona.[125] The monastery's programme of pastoral agriculture centred on the cow, not only for the meat and dairy they provided, but because they were the economic and social currency of early Irish society too.[126] The cattle in Iona's early Christian

[124] McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', p. 56.
[125] *VC*, §§ii.16, ii.29, ii.38, iii.23.
[126] Finbar McCormick, 'The Decline of the Cow: Agricultural and Settlement Change in Early Medieval Ireland', *Peritia*, 20 (2008), pp. 209-17; Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 27-66; McCormick,

middens seem to have been relatively small, and evidence from one midden shows that most were slaughtered before the age of five.[127] The bones found and the age-slaughter pattern is consistent with a mixed programme of dairying and meat eating.[128] One very large cattle bone was recovered in excavations and may have belonged to a species of wild-cattle that could be found in Scotland until the fifteenth century.[129] It has been suggested that the size of Iona, with a landscape far more suitable to sheep farming, may have even stunted the growth of the cattle.[130] Sheep were present in the Ionan diet, but in far fewer numbers; these too were smaller in size and close to the modern Soay breed.[131] This breed has reverted to being semi-wild on the Isle of St Kilda, and Barbara Noddle has argued that the slaughter ages of these Ionan sheep suggest that they were also semi-wild and hunted for meat, rather than domesticated.[132] Goats (possibly also wild) were present in small numbers,[133] but since goats were considered a 'poor-man's cow' they were often absent from higher-status sites.[134] One goat had a 'capped-elbow' from being confined on rocky land or from being provided too little bedding. This suggests that

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'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', pp. 54-60. Outer-Hebridean archaeological evidence backs up the importance of dairying from the very establishment of settled farming communities: Jacqui A. Mulville, Julie Bond, and Oliver Craig, 'The White Stuff, Milking in the Outer Scottish Isles', in Jacqui A. Mulville and Alan K. Outram (eds.), *The Zooarchaeology of Fats, Oils, Milk and Dairying* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 167-82; Lucy J.E. Cramp *et al.*, 'Immediate Replacement of Fishing with Dairying by the Earliest Farmers of the Northeast Atlantic Archipelagos', *Proceedings of the Royal Society: B*, 281 (2014), pp. 1-8.

[127] Barbara Noddle, 'A Comparison of Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit" with Others from the Iron Age Site of Dun Bhuirg', in Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, p. 38; McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', p. 315.

[128] Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', pp. 38-43.

[129] McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', pp. 313-18; Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', p. 38.

[130] McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', p. 315; Noddle, 'Animal Bone from Dun Cul Bhuirg', p. 226.

[131] Finbar McCormick, 'Early Faunal Evidence for Dairying', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 11:2 (1992), pp. 202-3; McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', p. 315; Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', p. 42; W. Groenman-van Waateringe, 'The Leather from Ditch 1', in Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', p. 319.

[132] Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', p. 42; *cf. VC*, §i.41.

[133] *VC*, §ii.37.

[134] McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', pp. 56-7.

the goat was tethered and mainly used for dairying.[135] The greater dairying and meat potential of cattle, in comparison to sheep and goats, was a further reason cows were the favoured domesticate beyond a simple cultural preference.[136] Also, the problem of keeping sheep and goats is that they, if they are left to their own devices, could ruin any arable agriculture being practised on the island.[137]

The most remarkable takeaway from the faunal evidence is the amount of food that was imported to the island from wild sources. If one compares the minimum number of individuals consumed from 'domestic sources' (cattle, sheep, goat, horse), to those likely 'imported' (deer, seal, pig, dolphin/whale), while excluding the species that were unlikely to be regularly consumed by the monastery, each source numbers fifty-one individuals. Even then, at least some cattle, sheep, and possibly goats were wild and hunted off island. This immediately parallels Iona's Iron Age inhabitation, and is a pattern more similar to Iron Age sites than to those of the early medieval period.[138] Some evidence in Iona's archaeological record suggests the monastery received the first-class cuts of Red Deer, mainly haunches.[139] This indicates that deer were butchered off-island and the highest quality of meat was transported to Iona as tribute or food renders: it is unlikely, but not impossible, that the monks were hunting these animals themselves. Later in the bone record, a greater number of complete carcasses were found in the middens, implying that the monastery at this time needed to exploit the entire animal to support the community.[140] This chronology is by no means secure: tentatively, those bones

[135] McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', pp. 56-7; Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', p. 42.
[136] McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', p. 315
[137] McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', p. 57.
[138] McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', p. 57.
[139] Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', p. 42.
[140] Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', pp. 42, 44. This may also be driven by the needs of craftworking on Iona, with a possible fragment of a shoe made of deerskin being recovered from the Iona middens: Groenman-van Waateringe, 'The Leather from Ditch 1', pp. 318-19, 327.

collected 'later' in the midden record are closest to radiocarbon dates for around AD 800; the earlier deposits might be closer to the turn of the eighth century.[141] These species might have been sourced from nearby Mull, the mainland or other, larger, Hebridean isles. One story in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* mentions a wild boar hunted on Skye with hounds.[142] In another mention of hunting, a man known to Columba from Lochaber uses a stake-trap to catch a large stag, a goat, and a salmon, which he sold to neighbours or used in hospitality.[143] It is interesting to note that these stories show the reader two different images of socio-economic status linked to hunting: hunting with hounds signals wealth, but the man from Lochaber was 'very poor' and 'pitiable', 'unable to feed his wife and children' by any other means.[144]

The importance of wild animals in the diets of Iona's monks is also reflected in the marine mammal finds. The *Life of Columba* speaks of a seal rookery off the coast of Mull that the monastery had rights to.[145] I expect that Iona had similar rights to estate lands and forests on nearby isles, where they sourced the other wild animals in their diet. Many of the seal bones were from younger specimens that could easily have been taken from the rookery and would have provided a good source of food.[146] The others were older: one of these seals shows a hunting wound in its pelvis.[147] The age distribution in the bone record points to the seasonal exploitation of the rookery during the breeding season. There is only sparse evidence for how these seals were hunted. A story in the *First Life of St Brigit* shows a hunter using of a harpoon from a boat, but I think this was a cautionary tale given the seal pulled the man out into the

[141] Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, pp. 29, 103-10.
[142] *VC*, §ii.26.
[143] *VC*, §ii.37.
[144] *VC*, §ii.37: *Alio in tempore quidam ad sanctam plebeus venit pauperrimus […]. Huic ergo miserabili viro, qui unde maritam et parvulos cabaret non habebat.*
[145] *VC*, §i.41; *cf.* Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 356.
[146] Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', pp. 40, 42.
[147] McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', p. 317; Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', p. 42.

open ocean and across the Irish sea.[148] The seasonal exploitation of a rookery, as seen in the *Life of Columba* and the archaeology, would suggest that the hunters would wait until the seals clustered on land.[149] One adult seal in the Ionan bone record had an infection that would have weakened the animal, and Barbara Noddle has suggested that many of the adult specimens would have been sick or injured targets, or maybe were dead seals that washed up on shore.[150] One of the *Canons of Adomnán* allowed for the consumption of dead marine animals found on the shoreline.[151] This may also explain the presence of whale and dolphin bone in the assemblages, likely coming from creatures that were beached or stranded on Iona or nearby.[152]

Fragments of horse bones were also found in the middens. These had clear butchery marks.[153] Horses were seen as a valuable animal in insular society. To eat one was a serious taboo, and carried a punishment of three and a half years of penance.[154] Adomnán recorded a story where St Columba blessed a loyal horse used to carry milk pails, and in another echoed the taboo of eating the animal by saying it was only fit for thieves.[155] Horse teeth found in the middens were from an aged pony, suggesting that horses were not kept on Iona for their meat, but primarily for their traction ability.[156] Popes Gregory and Zacharias wrote to St Boniface in the

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[148] *Vita Prima S. Brigitae*, trans. Seán Connolly, '*Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*: Background and Historical Value', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 119 (1989), §73.
[149] I am thinking here of Inuit walrus hunting practises as seen in *Nanook of the North*, dir. Robert Flaherty (Film, 1922), https://youtu.be/lkW14Lu1IBo?si=u0RsbAHsZB9bF7-b (28 Apr. 2025).
[150] Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', p. 42.
[151] *Canones Adomnani*, ed. and trans. Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, §1.
[152] *AU*, §828.3; Emily Murray, 'Early Evidence for Coastal Exploitation in Ireland' (DPhil, The Queen's University Belfast, 1999), pp. 169-72; Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 282-5; Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', pp. 42-4.
[153] McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', p. 315; Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', p. 39.
[154] 'The Old Irish Penitential', trans. D.A. Binchy, in Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, §i.2, p. 259; Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 352-3.
[155] *VC*, §§i.21, iii.23.
[156] Noddle, 'Mammalian Bones in the "Midden Deposit"', p. 42. The Irish evidence supports this: Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 88-101.

early eighth century prohibiting the consumption of wild and domesticated horses.[157] The taboo may have started as a Christian rejection of a pagan ritual of kingship that involved eating horse, described later by Gerald of Wales.[158] While Gerald is rightly to be doubted,[159] there may be some truth to his account. The highest number of horse bones discovered on an Iron Age site was at Tara, the royal seat of Ireland, and near the likely site of royal inauguration.[160] It clearly was not, however, a taboo strictly followed given the finds on Iona, but also on other monastic-ecclesiastical sites such as Moyne Co. Mayo, Church Island Co. Kerry, Illaunloughan Island Co. Kerry, and Skellig Michael.[161] Moreover, the legal-medical text *Bretha Crólige* advised against the sick being given horse to eat, not because it was forbidden, but because it disturbed the stomach.[162] In his reports on the Ionan faunal remains, Finbar McCormick offered two interesting interpretations of these finds: first, given Adomnán seems to advocate the taboo of eating horses, it may be that the abbot introduced the injunctions onto Iona;[163] second, McCormick postulated that horses

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[157] Boniface, *Epistulae*, trans. Ephraim Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface* (New York NY, 1976), §§20[28], 71[87]. These commands are originally Old Testament: Lev. 11:1-47, 17:12-15.
[158] Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John J. O'Meara (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 109-10, §102; E.J. Gwynn, 'An Irish Penitential', *Ériu*, 7 (1914), p. 180; Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 352-3.
[159] On his account being 'exuberantly fictional', see for example, Thomas Owen Clancy, 'King-Making and Images of Kingship in Medieval Gaelic Literature', in Richard Welander, David J. Breeze, and Thomas Owen Clancy (eds.), *The Stone of Destiny: Artefact and Icon* (Edinburgh, 2003), pp. 94-7.
[160] Other rituals of kingship involving horses were not uncommon for the period: Finbar McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Tara', *Discovery Programme Report*, 6 (2002), pp. 106-7; *id.*, 'The Horse in Early Ireland', *Anthropozoologica*, 42:1 (2007), pp. 90-2.
[161] Emily Murray and Finbar McCormick, 'Environmental Analysis and the Food Supply', in Jenny White Marshall and Claire Walsh, *Illaunloughan Island: An Early Medieval Monastery in County Kerry* (Bray, 2005), pp. 68, 73; Emily Murray, 'The Mammal Bones', in Edward Bourke, Alan R. Hayden, and Ann Lynch, *Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry and South Peak. Archaeological Stratigraphic Report: 1986-2010* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 425-36; Finbar McCormick, 'The Animal Bones', in Conleth Manning, 'Excavation at Moyne Graveyard, Shrule, Co. Mayo', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 87C (1987), pp. 60-8; G. Roche, 'Report on Zoological Material', in Michael J. O'Kelly, 'Church Island Near Valencia, Co. Kerry', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 59C (1957-1959), pp. 133-4.
[162] *Bretha Crólige*, ed. and trans. D.A. Binchy, '*Bretha Crólige*', *Ériu*, 12 (1938), §25.
[163] McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', p. 315.

may have been emergency rations for the monastic community in times of shortage or agricultural stress.[164]

The *Life of Columba* also shows that the monks put a substantial amount of labour into cereal production; probably most of the fertile land of the island on the machair plain was given over to arable use.[165] This came with challenges. Machair is especially vulnerable to exposure, sea-spray, wind erosion, drought, has many mineral deficiencies, and its high-ph alkaline soils make most cereals difficult to cultivate. This is true even when fertilised, something probably not introduced, at least systematically (as seen in the Outer Hebrides), until the arrival of Scandinavians.[166] The *Life of Columba* mentions that the monks mainly grew barley, a crop that was suitable to the island's cool climate but one that may have pushed up against the limit of the soil's productivity.[167] Spring barley typically has a growing season of between eighteen and twenty-four weeks, and the monks of Iona seem to have sown their crops in April, harvesting them in August.[168] Pollen samples taken from one of the monastery's *vallum* ditches reveal that the monks were cultivating

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[164] McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', p. 57.
[165] *VC*, §§i.37, ii.28
[166] Angus, 'De Tha Machair? Towards a Machair Definition'; Helen Smith, 'The Ethnohistory of Hebridean Agriculture', in Mike Parker Pearson (ed.), *From Machair to Mountains: Archaeological Survey and Excavation in South Uist* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 379, 389-91; Jennifer R. Jones, 'Isotope Zooarchaeology in Viking Scotland: Previous Research, Possibilities and Future Directions', in Tom Horne, Elizabeth Pierce, and Rachel Barrowman (eds.), *The Viking Age in Scotland: Studies in Scottish Scandinavian Archaeology* (Edinburgh, 2023), pp. 156-7; Jennifer R. Jones *et al*., 'Palaeoenvironmental Modelling of $\delta^{13}C$ and $\delta^{15}N$ Values in the North Atlantic Islands: Understanding Past Marine Resource Use', *Rapid Communications in Mass Spectrometry*, 26 (2012), p. 2404; Ritchie, 'The Meaning and Definition of Machair', p. 439. *Cf.* Alexander Fenton, 'Early Manuring Techniques', in Roger Mercer (ed.), *Farming Practice in British Prehistory* (Edinburgh, 1981), p. 215; Bourke, Hayden, and Lynch, *Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry and South Peak*, p. 467; Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 229-30.
[167] McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', p. 55; Blakely H. Paynter and Neil A. Fettell, 'Australia', in Steven Edward Ullrich (ed.), *Barley: Production, Improvement, and Uses* (2011), pp. 267-70; Liugi Cattivelli *et al*., 'Abiotic Stresses in Barley: Problems and Solutions', in Ullrich (ed.), *Barley: Production, Improvement, and Uses*, pp. 288-9; *VC*, §ii.3.
[168] Agricultural and Horticultural Development Board, *Barley growth guide* (Coventry, 2023), p. 9, https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/barley-growth-guide (28 Apr. 2025); Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 335; *VC*, §§ii.3, ii.44.

cereals around the east coast of the island until about halfway through the seventh century.[169] After this transition point, the pollen evidence for pastoral agriculture remained stable for the east coast, but the amount of cereal pollen decreased, suggesting that cereal cultivation was practised locally but elsewhere. This probably shows the point when arable agriculture became focused and intensified on the machair plain, and domestic animals were largely excluded from that area. Adomnán recorded a story of Iona's monks building a wall around the machair that might reflect this shift,[170] but it also showed that the monks had established a sophisticated agricultural programme to maximise land use while protecting their crops from any domesticates.[171] Adomnán also revealed the great deal of Ionan investment in processing cereals. The *Life of Columba* mentions a kiln for drying the barley, at least one barn to store the grain, and a monk designated as 'baker' with his own bakery.[172] A mill stone is mentioned in the *Life* and one has been found in excavations.[173] Paired with a possible, though unverifiable, site for an early medieval watermill, this may suggest that Iona's system of grain production was both highly

[169] Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', pp. 356-7; Bohncke, 'The Pollen Diagram from Ditch 1', pp. 346-8.
[170] *VC*, §ii.28.
[171] This is a pattern followed in the pre- and post-Norse Outer Hebrides and Northern Isles: Ingrid Mainland *et al*., 'Toiling with Teeth: An Integrated Dental Analysis of Sheep and Cattle Dentition in Iron Age and Viking–Late Norse Orkney', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 6 (2016), pp. 837-55; Jones, 'Isotope Zooarchaeology in Viking Scotland', pp. 157-8; Jennifer R. Jones and Jacqui A. Mulville, 'Norse Animal Husbandry in Liminal Environments: Stable Isotope Evidence from the Scottish North Atlantic Islands', *Environmental Archaeology*, 23:4 (2018), pp. 338-51; Jones *et al*., 'Palaeoenvironmental Modelling of $\delta^{13}C$ and $\delta^{15}N$ Values in the North Atlantic Islands', pp. 2399-406.
[172] *VC*, §§i.45, iii.10, iii.23. The kiln to dry corn and the bakery were probably on the same site.
[173] Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', p. 308; *VC*, §iii.23. A mill is also mentioned in the preface of the Ionan poem *Altus Prosator*: *Preface to the Hymn Altus Prosator*, in *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, ed. and trans. Bernard and Atkinson, ii, pp. 23-6; on this poem and its preface, see above, Chapter Three, pp. 141-3.

organised and technologically innovative.[174] If Iona did feature a seventh-century horizontal watermill, it would be one of the earliest in the Irish-speaking world.[175]

For a thesis focused on the ocean and studying an island monastery, perhaps it is surprising that the evidence for fishing has yet to be addressed, but this reflects the small amount of fish bone found in the archaeological record. Across excavations, only one midden site seems to have any fish bone preserved, and even the bones found in this midden are an incredibly small sample. This collection does reveal the wide variety of fish consumed on the island.[176] These were gurnard, cod, hake, saithe, and red sea bream.[177] The monastery also collected marine molluscs including winkles and limpets from the shoreline, and oysters from farther offshore – something not seen in the Iron Age assemblage.[178] Adomnán's *Life of Columba* describes so many sea journeys that one might expect the monks to have been master fishermen. Yet sea-fishing in Ireland, and across most of Europe at the time, was uncommon, possibly even covered by a taboo.[179] While some evidence for deep-water fishing does appear in the archaeological record for Ireland, it is relatively

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[174] Jerry O'Sullivan, 'Excavations Beside Sruth a' Mhuilinn ('the Mill Stream'), Iona', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 124 (1994), pp. 499-506.
[175] Colin Rynne, 'Waterpower in Early Medieval Ireland', in Squatriti (ed.), *Working with Water*, pp. 1-50; Finbar McCormick, Aidan O'Sullivan, and Thomas R. Kerr, 'The Farming Landscape of Early Medieval Ireland', in Finbar McCormick *et al.*, *Early Medieval Agriculture, Livestock and Cereal Production in Ireland, AD 400-1100* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 34-6; Thomas McErlean and Norman Crothers, *Harnessing the Tides: The Early Medieval Tide Mills at Nendrum Monastery Strangford Lough* (Norwich, 2007), p. 11.
[176] Alwyne Wheeler, 'Report on the Fish Bones from the Monastic Midden', in Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, pp. 47-8.
[177] Wheeler, 'Report on the Fish Bones', pp. 47-8.
[178] Woodward, 'Marine Molluscs', p. 49.
[179] James H. Barret, 'Medieval Sea Fishing, AD 500-1550: Chronology, Causes and Consequences', in James H. Barrett and David Orton (eds.), *Cod and Herring: The Archaeology and History of Medieval Sea Fishing* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 250-3; Keith Dobney and Anton Ervynck, 'To Fish or Not to Fish? Evidence for the Possible Avoidance of Fish Consumption During the Iron Age Around the North Sea', in Colin Haselgrove and Tom Moore (eds.), *The Later Iron Age in Britain and Beyond* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 403-18. *Cf.* Jennifer R. Jones and Jacqui A. Mulville, 'Isotopic and Zooarchaeological Approaches Towards Understanding Aquatic Resource Use in Human Economies and Animal Management in the Prehistoric Scottish North Atlantic Islands', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 6 (2016), pp. 665-77.

sparse.[180] The Irish legal evidence points almost exclusively to fishing on rivers and estuaries with weirs, nets, and traps.[181] Indeed, in the *Life of Columba*, no sea-fishing is described, only salmon-fishing on inshore waterways by net and by trap.[182] What makes Iona's archaeological fish evidence interesting is that the species present are large specimens (up to a metre long and ten kilograms in weight), and species that feed in deep water, all pointing towards some level of fishing at sea.[183]

This has led scholars to suggest that this community was 'prepared' for deep sea fishing in a systemised way, making 'extensive fishing expeditions out to sea'.[184] The best guess is that they fished from a boat with long baited line and hooks, perhaps made from horsehair, and held by hand or by a wooden rod.[185] Yet most of the species seen in the midden deposits can be recovered near shore, even the large specimens, and the assemblage is too small to suggest a systematic practice of offshore fishing. The occasional venture in a boat, or a lucky catch near the shore are more plausible.[186] At the Iron Age site at Dun Vulan, South Uist fish bone evidence has been linked to shoreline fishing from rocky promontories and craigs that jut out into the sea, or using the shelter of promontories and bays to fish in deeper waters for larger specimens.[187] A cave site in the north of Mull near Iona shows a consistent

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[180] Sheila Hamilton-Dyer, 'Exploring the Contrasts: Fish-Bone Assemblages from Medieval Ireland', in Barrett and Orton (eds.), *Cod and Herring*, pp. 231-8.
[181] Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 285-98.
[182] *VC*, §§ii.19, ii.37, iii.23.
[183] Wheeler, 'Report on the Fish Bones', pp. 47-8.
[184] Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, pp. 49-50; Richard Reece, 'Recent Work on Iona', *Scottish Archaeological Forum*, 5 (1973), p. 44.
[185] James H. Barrett, Rebecca A. Nicholson, and Ruby Cerón-Carrasco, 'Archaeo-Ichthyological Evidence for Long-term Socioeconomic Trends in Northern Scotland: 3500 BC to AD 1500', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 26 (1999), p. 364; McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', pp. 59-60; Murray, 'Early Evidence for Coastal Exploitation in Ireland', pp. 61-2, 306; Wheeler, 'Report on the Fish Bones', p. 48.
[186] Barrett, Nicholson, and Cerón-Carrasco, 'Evidence for Long-term Socioeconomic Trends', pp. 368-9; Wheeler, 'Report on the Fish Bones', pp. 47-8.
[187] Ruby Cerón-Carrasco and Michael Parker Pearson, 'The Fish Bones', in Michael Parker Pearson and Niall Sharples (eds.), *Between Land and Sea: Excavations at Dun Vulan, South Uist* (Sheffield, 1999), pp. 274-82.

shore-based and risk-free approach to fishing from the Iron Age into the Middle Ages.[188] The real moment of change when fishing offshore became viable was the arrival of the Vikings: the 'fish event horizon'.[189] Their arrival marked consistently large specimens being found in large and numerous assemblages, only possible with a radical change in fishing behaviour. Recent work done on one of Iona's daughter monasteries, Portmahomack in northern Scotland, supports this shift. Isotope analysis showed that the early inhabitants consumed mainly terrestrial animals and cereals, avoiding seafood until the arrival of the Norse.[190] Viking boat technology may have also contributed to the growth in fishing. As is discussed in the next chapter, the boats deployed in Pictland and Dál Riata had significant flaws, and while they were used for transport and for war, they do not seem to have been used to fish.[191] If Iona's monks did fish in boats from deep water, they were not organised to do so regularly.[192] Overall, the fish bones found in archaeological excavations misrepresent the role of the sea in Iona's agricultural programme. The dominant way the ocean contributed to the monastery's sustainability was by acting as a gateway to

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[188] Claire Ingrem, 'Fish Bones', in Steven Mithen and Karen Wicks, 'Croig Cave: A Late Bronze Age Ornament Deposit and Three Millennia of Fishing and Foraging on the North-West Coast of Mull Scotland', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 142 (2012), pp. 95-108.
[189] The classic article is James H. Barrett, Alison M. Locker, and Callum M. Roberts, '"Dark Age Economics" Revisited: The English Fish Bone Evidence AD 600-1600', *Antiquity*, 78 (2004), pp. 618-36.
[190] Jyoti Stuart-Lawson and Shirley Curtis-Summers, 'Reconstructing the Childhood Diet of Individuals Buried with the Pictish Monastic Community at Portmahomack', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 150 (2021), pp. 385-406; Shirley Curtis-Summers, Jessica A. Pearson, and Angela L. Lamb, 'From Picts to Parish: Stable Isotope Evidence of Dietary Change at Medieval Portmahomack, Scotland', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 31, no. 102303 (2020); Shirley Curtis-Summers, Janet Montgomery, and Martin Carver, 'Stable Isotope Evidence for Dietary Contrast Between Pictish and Medieval Populations at Portmahomack, Scotland', *Medieval Archaeology*, 58 (2014), pp. 21-43.
[191] Barrett, Nicholson, and Cerón-Carrasco, 'Evidence for Long-term Socioeconomic Trends', p. 368; Ian Morrison, 'Aspects of Viking Small Craft in the Light of Shetland Practice', in John R. Baldwin (ed.), *Scandinavian Shetland: An Ongoing Tradition?* (Edinburgh, 1978), pp. 57-75; see also below, Chapter Two, pp. 87-94.
[192] However, these fish may have been sourced through tribute, or from fisherman employed by the monastery. A tradition holds that St Comgall's community at Bangor employed a fisherman who used lines and nets on Lough Neagh: *Aided Echach maic Máireda*, ed. and trans. Ranke de Vries, *Two Texts on Loch nEchach* (London, 2012), §§9, 10(c).

bring imports onto the island – imports that supplemented the monks' diet and the island's productivity. Any deep-sea fishing may have likewise been a response to supplementing the island's productivity.

All the archaeological evidence available points to the specific island geography of Iona shaping the diet of the monks and their agricultural practice.[193] Looking at the faunal record of the early medieval monastery, the small amount of land available on the island meant that the monks prioritised cattle as a source of meat and dairy; this was for both cultural and practical reasons. Even if the landscape was more suited to sheep or goats, these species would prevent any meaningful practice of arable agriculture which took place on the island's machair. The monks devoted a significant amount of labour and technological innovation to this arable land. However, the monks also supplemented the productivity of the island with outside wild food resources. The Ionan hunting estates may have played a crucial role in this. Occasional deep-sea fishing may have also been practised as a response to the same need: risk-taking behaviour to help offset any shortfalls in the monastery's productivity.

Between Eden and Starvation

Finbar McCormick's suggestion, that the butchered horse found in the middens of early Christian Iona might signal that the animal was eaten as 'emergency rations' in times of food scarcity, might also point to the danger of any shortfall in the island's productivity.[194] Any suggestion that the Ionan community faced shortages, or faced challenges in making their island sustainable, is in stark

[193] McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', p. 318.
[194] McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', p. 57.

contrast to the image of Iona as wealthy, prosperous, and largely immune to hardship. The midden finds have often been interpreted as showing a community that was 'living off the fat of the land', 'having enough to eat and more', perhaps even ruining 'the good name of the monks' because of its luxurious diet.[195] For these authors, Iona's importation of wild food resources was not an example of supplementing shortfalls in the island's productivity, but rather the comfort of extra food. A counter should be offered to this dominant perspective: the diet of Iona's monks was moulded more by their island environment, and perhaps ecclesiastical practice, than any 'gastronomic indulgence'.[196] This section of the chapter explores the evidence for food shortages on Iona and what methods Iona's monks used to make their community sustainable. This reveals the potential religious and local tensions underneath the monastery's relationship to its climate and agricultural system.

On Columba's death in June AD 597 the island of Iona was sealed off from the outside world by a storm that lasted for three days and nights.[197] This is an obvious reference to the death of Christ and the three days between His death and His resurrection,[198] but it is not a stretch to think Iona could have been sealed off by such a storm. While gales are infrequent in the month of June in the present climate,[199] the evidence presented for the cooler climate of the early medieval period suggests intense summer storms were more frequent than today.[200] Certainly during the winter, when gale force winds were frequent, it would be expected that Iona

[195] Charles Doherty, 'Some Aspects of Hagiography as a Source for Irish Economic History', *Peritia*, 1 (1982), p. 301; Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, pp. 49-50; *id*., 'Recent Work on Iona', p. 44.
[196] McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', p. 58.
[197] *VC*, §iii.23.
[198] Matt. 27:64, 28:1-3.
[199] See above, p. 31.
[200] Trouet, Scourse, and Raible, 'North Atlantic Storminess: Reconciling Contradictory Proxy Records', pp. 51-3.

could be sealed off for many days. The winter unreliability of travel to Iona and Mull continues to be a frustration for residents, even with modern vessels.[201] For the early medieval period as a whole, Jonathan Wooding has remarked that setting sail in any of the winter months would be difficult to imagine.[202] Given the reliance of the monastic community on imported foods, any lack of preparation could lead to shortages in winter, or in any extended period when winds and rough seas sealed the island off from the outside world. The ocean environment could present an existential challenge to the success of the monastery. If ocean isolation combined with an agricultural crisis resulting from poor weather, even more serious shortfalls could be expected. For example, if the winter snows recorded in the *Iona Chronicle* killed off the cattle that provided vital dairy and meat when other food was scarce during the year. Likewise, if the harvest failed because of drought or rain, stores of grain could run low. The desperation of the monks in these circumstances might have them turn to the loyal pony, or even other desperate sources of food. The first rule in the *Canons of Adomnán* allows for the consumption of dead marine animals that had washed ashore only if they were not rotting.[203] This echoes a story from the *Life of St Cuthbert*. Sailing to Pictland, the Northumbrian saint was stranded during a fierce ocean storm. God provided portions of dolphin meat that washed ashore, relieving Cuthbert and his monks of hunger because they lacked supplies.[204] That such an injunction in the *Canons of Adomnán* was needed, might suggest that some Ionan

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[201] Mull and Iona Ferry Committee, 'CalMac Winter Reliability', (2019), https://mullandionaferrycommittee.org/2020/02/16/weather-cancellations/ (29 Apr. 2025); *id*., 'Declining Weather Reliability of CalMac Ferry Services', (2023), https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/net-zero-energy-and-transport-committee/correspondence/2023/joereade_declineingweather.pdf (29 Apr. 2025).
[202] Jonathan Wooding, *Communication and Commerce Along the Western Sealanes, AD 400-800* (Oxford, 1996), p. 18; *cf.* Horden, 'Afterword', p. 566.
[203] *Canones Adomnani*, §1.
[204] *Vita S. Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo*, §ii.4, and Bede's, *Vita S. Cuthberti*, §11, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave, *Two Lives of St Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1985).

monks had been desperate enough to eat even rotting carcasses that had washed up on shore.

Yet these food injunctions might concern monastic dietary practices rather than being signs of agricultural stress. Unlike terrestrial animals which had to be bled before they could be consumed, marine mammals were treated like fish.[205] There may be some continuity to this. Inhabitants of the Hebrides continued to treat seal flesh as acceptable during fast days into the modern period.[206] Even the predominant consumption of wild animals such as deer by the Ionan community may not reflect environmental constraints but instead a strict adherence to a monastic diet.[207] The ideal supposedly maintained in Máel Rúain's monastery of Tallaght was vegetarian except for the meat of deer and wild pig.[208] The monastery at Moyne Co. Mayo had middens filled with deer bone like on Iona, perhaps in response to these dietary restrictions.[209] Though only one fragment of deer was found at Illaunloughan Co. Kerry, the preponderance of other wild animals in the bone record has also been used to suggest a link between wild animal consumption and a monastic diet.[210] The archaeology of Iona does not, however, suggest the early community went to such lengths to maintain a diet without domesticated meat.[211] In fact, the documentary sources suggest a deep concern for maintaining moderation in fasts.[212] In Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, the arrival of a guest, Columba's journeying to a daughter

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[205] *Cf.* Lev. 11:9-12, 17:12-15.
[206] Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, 2nd edn (London, 1716), pp. 65-6.
[207] McCormick, 'The Archaeology of the Early Monastery', p. 58.
[208] *The Monastery of Tallaght*, ed. and trans. Edward J. Gwynn and W.J. Purton, 'The Monastery of Tallaght', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 29C (1911-12), §6. Deer and wild-pig may not be fatty like other domesticated meats: *cf.* Lev. 7:23-25.
[209] McCormick, 'The Animal Bones', p. 67.
[210] Emily Murray, Finbar McCormick, and Gill Plunkett, 'The Food Economies of Atlantic Island Monasteries: The Documentary and Archaeo-Environmental Evidence', *Environmental Archaeology*, 9:2 (2004), pp. 186-7.
[211] See above, p. 51.
[212] Kathleen Hughes had a similar impression: *The Church in Early Irish Society*, p. 62.

monastery, or a day of hard work all resulted in the fast being relaxed.[213] Iona's practices of dietary moderation seem to have even influenced Máel Rúain's Tallaght, which preserved a story describing how butter was added to the watered-down porridge of Ionan recluses to bring them back from the edge of starvation.[214] The *Amrae Coluimb Chille* emphasised that Columba would not fast outside of the Lord's law.[215] Monastic diets and fasting patterns did also overlap with the agricultural calendar and were a key method of preventing shortfalls: seals and other wild animals would have been crucial sources of food both during lent, during those early months of the year before the harvest, and before dairying began.[216]

The importance of wild animals to the Ionan diet is a better indication of the archipelagic setting of Iona and the island's small amount of agricultural land: that is, the ocean landscape and the 'oceanicity' of the climate.[217] Bede reckoned that Iona was only five hides in size by English calculations, enough to theoretically support five families.[218] Even the 'small estates' granted for monasteries like Whitby and Hartlepool in Northumbria were ten hides in size, Ripon had an estate of forty hides, Jarrow forty as well, and Wearmouth seventy hides.[219] Seen in *Map 1*, there is a scarcity of arable and pastureland close to Iona largely because of the Hebridean climate and Scottish topography: environmental forces that have existed for millennia. This may have been one reason raths, despite being the typical Irish

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[213] *VC*, §§i.21, i.26, i.29.
[214] Gwynn and Purton, 'The Monastery of Tallaght', §52. On the potential Ionan influence on Tallaght and the *Céli Dé* reform movement, see Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Iona, Scotland, and the Céli Dé', in Barbara E. Crawford (ed.), *Scotland in Dark Age Britain* (St Andrews, 1996), pp. 115-17.
[215] *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §vii.8-9.
[216] Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 346; Murray, 'Early Evidence for Coastal Exploitation in Ireland', pp. 88, 154.
[217] McCormick, 'The Animal Bones from Ditch 1', p. 318.
[218] *HE*, §§iii.4, iv.23(21); T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Kinship, Status and the Origins of the Hide', *Past and Present*, 56 (1972), pp. 5-15, 19-21.
[219] Bede, *Historia Abbatum*, ed. and trans. Christopher Grocock and Ian Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (Oxford, 2013), §4, 7; *HE*, §§iii.24-5.

settlement type, have not been found in Dálriatan Scotland: with the pastoral landscape so fragmented by the sea and highland ridges, the protection offered by raths was redundant in an environment not conducive to traditional cattle raiding or cattle rearing.[220] Instead, Dálriatan raids may have been amphibious expeditions.[221]

Cattle and barley were also susceptible to the weather events seen above in the annalistic evidence. A diversified agricultural programme that included the hunting of wild animals would be more resilient to those climatic shocks. This was the case in Finland during the LALIA where a versatile agricultural programme that included hunting and fishing helped communities endure the serious climate fluctuations that crushed the other Baltic communities which relied primarily on terrestrial agriculture.[222] The Ionan agricultural programme may have been naturally diversified because of the lack of arable and pastureland in Dál Riata, but the community's harvesting of wild resources was probably also a deliberate response to the effects of the climate and the environmental realities that surrounded it.[223] Given the limited space for agriculture on the island, the gathering of marine molluscs and fishing by the community are further examples of spreading out agricultural risk across different foodstuffs. Importantly, while the collecting of marine molluscs is often interpreted as a sign of famine, this can be done year-round if perhaps storms or bad weather cut off the island from other resources.[224] Looking again at some of the ecclesiastical sites besides Iona that featured horse bone in their middens (Skellig Michael, Church Island, and Illaunloughan island), one characteristic the Hebridean

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[220] McCormick, 'Cows, Ringforts and the Origins of Early Christian Ireland', p. 36.
[221] *VC*, §§ii.22; *cf.* i.46.
[222] Markku Oinonen *et al.*, 'Buried in Water, Burdened By Nature – Resilience Carried the Iron Age People Through Fimbulvinter', *PLoS ONE*, 15:4 (2020), e0231787.
[223] Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', p. 366.
[224] I have explored this topic in greater detail elsewhere: 'Shellfish Consumption on Iona, Scotland: a Re-Interpretation of Marine Mollusc Harvesting in an Early Medieval Seascape', in Christina Laurenti and John Dinges (eds.), *Water Flowing Through Archaeology. Proceedings from the 2023 Graduate Archaeology at Oxford Conference* (Oxford, 2025), pp. 167-74.

isle shares with these locations is insularity. Excavations on all these islands revealed that they needed to source a large amount of their food from the mainland. These communities' exploitation of wild resources, including fish, marine molluscs, and shore birds, has also been linked to the presence of a stringent monastic diet.[225] Instead, and like on Iona, they may have responded to their ocean-insularity by diversifying their diet. This would help protect these island monasteries against any shocks to their system of imports.

While the exploitation of wild animals in response to the climate's impact on cereal and pastoral animal agriculture is one strategy to avoid food shortages, intensified arable farming was another way to insure against climate variability. While the cow was the most significant agricultural unit in the minds of the Irish, bread and cereals were crucial economically and socially too.[226] If winter isolated you from the many imports that made up your diet, a store of grain would be crucial to surviving the cold months.[227] Iona's cereal productivity has been characterised as highly productive.[228] This image can potentially be seen in Adomnán's depiction of Iona's arable farming. One of the last things Columba did before he passed away in the *Life* was to walk to the barn where the monks kept their stock of dried cereals and bless them. Two large piles of grain sat in the barn 'set aside', possibly in reserve, and Columba commented that: "'I very much congratulate my family of

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[225] McCormick, 'The Animal bones', pp. 60-8; Murray and McCormick, 'Environmental Analysis and the Food Supply', pp. 79-80; Murray, 'The Mammal Bones', pp. 425-36; Emily Murray, 'The Marine Molluscs', in Bourke, Hayden, and Lynch, *Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry and South Peak*, pp. 450-1; O'Kelly, 'Church Island Near Valencia, Co. Kerry', pp. 130-1; Roche, 'Report on Zoological Material', pp. 133-4; Sheila Hamilton-Dyer, 'Bird and Fish Bones', in Bourke, Hayden, and Lynch, *Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry and South Peak*, pp. 437-49.
[226] Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 219-20, 316-9; Michael A. Monk, 'Early medieval agriculture in Ireland: The Case for Tillage', in Emer Purcell *et al.* (eds.), *Clerics, Kings and Vikings: Essays on Medieval Ireland in Honour of Donnchadh Ó Corráin* (Dublin, 2015), pp. 309-22.
[227] The ability of grain to transcend the seasonality of other food stuffs makes it a staple of winter food renders in Ireland, and the failure of cereals makes any resulting shortage crushing: Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 317-8.
[228] Jones *et al.*, 'Social Transformations and Crisis on Iona', p. 184.

monks, because even this year, if I am needed to depart to some place, you have enough bread for the year'".[229] Some have argued that from the late seventh century in Ireland there was a swing towards an agricultural economy focused more on cereal production than cattle.[230] This shift may have implications for the arable programme of Iona, the monastery's response to the climate, and the significance Adomnán and Columba placed on these stores of grain.

Whereas wealth and status had been conjoined with cattle ownership, potential shocks to the social and economic system, culminating in the late eighth century, could have shifted the balance of agricultural importance towards the production of cereals.[231] The climate has been suggested as a primary driver of these changes: the poor weather conditions of the eighth century described in the annals, particularly the wet summers and the winter snowfalls, have been presented as key contributors.[232] Clustered between *c.* AD 760 and *c.* AD 800 the chronicles recorded six snowfalls, seven storms, and a drought.[233] This might seem 'counter-intuitive' given the effects this climate would have had on the cereal productivity, but the danger posed by cold and snow to a system overly focused on pastoral agriculture, and which did not produce hay or stable their cattle during winter, was potentially greater.[234] Barley and oats, the dominant cereal crops, would be resistant enough to the wet, and, when paired with corn-drying kilns, technological innovation could overcome the climatic downturn. The increase in the number of horizontal water

[229] *VC*, §iii.23: *'Valde congratulor meis familiaribus monacis, quia hoc etiam anno, si quoquam vobis emigrare me oportuerit, annuum sufficientem habebitis panem'*.
[230] McCormick, 'The Decline of the Cow', pp. 209-21.
[231] *Cf*. Monk, 'Early Medieval Agriculture in Ireland: The Case for Tillage', pp. 309-22.
[232] Kerr, Swindles, and Plunkett, 'Making Hay While the Sun Shines?', pp. 2868-74.
[233] *AU*, §§759.5, 760.1, 762.1, 764.1, 764.7, 777.4, 779.8, 780.8, 783.4, 786.3, 789.7, 799.4, 801.9.
[234] Kerr, Swindles, and Plunkett, 'Making Hay While the Sun Shines?', pp. 2868-74.

mills at this time may be a further technological indication of the shift to a cereal-focused economy.[235]

Along with this shift in agricultural priorities, there may have been a change in social structure. An arable programme focused on cereals made the production of surpluses and the building of independent wealth easier.[236] While the total number of corn-drying kilns decreased in this period, 'keyhole' type kilns, more effective and long-lasting, increased at this time. This increase might have been paired with an attempt to control the proliferation of kilns and centralise grain processing among the nobility.[237] The increased cereal production has also been linked to the proliferation of raised or platform raths. Often situated close to the best arable land in Ireland, these settlements were raised up artificially and constructed to protect their human occupants rather than any livestock.[238] Arable agriculture required a greater investment in manpower, and these habitations may have been the residences of a 'proto-feudal' elite whose power was based on their control of arable land and the people (free and unfree) who worked it.

This narrative of change is not perfect. Thomas R. Kerr's analysis of Ireland-wide faunal assemblages has found that cattle had a continuing importance to the medieval Irish economy. This led him to question his own theory of a movement towards cereal agriculture.[239] His work did however find a regional shift towards agricultural programmes that suited local environments, breaking the universal agro-

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[235] McCormick, O'Sullivan, and Kerr, 'The Farming Landscape of Early Medieval Ireland', pp. 28-9.
[236] McCormick, 'The Decline of the Cow', pp. 218-19, 221.
[237] Michael A. Monk and Orla Power, 'More than a Grain of Truth Emerges from a Rash of Corn-Drying Kilns?', *Archaeology Ireland*, 26:2 (2012), p. 40.
[238] Kerr, Swindles, and Plunkett, 'Making Hay While the Sun Shines?', pp. 2869-72; McCormick, 'The Decline of the Cow', pp. 216-21; Thomas R. Kerr, *Early Christian Settlement in North-West Ulster* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 2-9, 86-116; Thomas R. Kerr, 'The Height of Fashion: Raised Raths in the Landscape of North-West Ulster', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology*, 18 (2009), pp. 63-75.
[239] Thomas R. Kerr, 'Livestock Farming', in McCormick *et al.*, *Early Medieval Agriculture, Livestock and Cereal Production in Ireland*, p. 66.

societal focus on cattle-rearing.[240] Likewise, any sharp increase in the number of water mills in response to the climate has been questioned. A slow introduction of the technology from as early as the sixth century is an alternative model.[241] Interestingly however, this model of climate-forced social change in Ireland has been taken up by Jean-Pierre Devroey in his study of Carolingian responses to the environment.[242] Devroey has argued that the peasant logic of production was risk-averse, using crop-diversity and agricultural flexibility in response to climate disruption. This ran contrary to the seigneurial logic of production that was governed more by wealth accumulation, social competition, and wealth transfer. Systems of extraction and technologies of storage developed to support the seigneurial logic of production at the expense of peasants, contributing to the famines of the eighth and ninth centuries that were sparked by the climatic events seen in the Irish annals.[243] For Devroey, the 'creative destruction' of the eighth-century climate in Ireland changed the fundamental relationship between peasant producers and noble extractors.[244] Given Iona's stockpiling of grain, its corn-drying kiln and baker, and the possible presence of an early watermill, can the Columban community's arable agriculture and its response to possible food shortages be seen in relation to these narratives of social and economic change? Instead of proto-feudal nobles riding chariots across the plain of Brega extracting dues from their tenants, were Iona's

[240] Kerr, 'Livestock Farming', p. 99; Merial McClatchie *et al.*, 'Changing Perspectives on Early Medieval Farming in Ireland', in Rhiannon Comeau and Andy Seaman (eds.), *Living off the Land: Agriculture in Wales c.400-1600 AD* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 71-4.
[241] Colin Rynne, 'Technological Change in the Agrarian Economy of Early Medieval Ireland: New Archaeological Evidence for the Introduction of the Coulter Plough', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 118C (2018), pp. 56-65.
[242] Jean-Pierre Devroey, *La Nature et le Roi: Environment, Pouvoir et Société à l'Âge de Charlemagne (740-820)* (Paris, 2019), pp. 171-5.
[243] Devroey, *La Nature et le Roi*, pp. 427-51; *cf.* Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 535-88.
[244] Devroey, *La Nature et le Roi*, pp. 185-6.

monks sailing the Hebrides collecting rents in grains and first-fruits to stock-up for hard winters?[245]

The pollen record indicates that in the early seventh century the arable agriculture on Iona was reorganised so that crops moved away from the east coast.[246] From then on the growing of crops seems to have focused on the machair plain, as seen in Adomnán's depiction of Ionan farming.[247] Dated to between *c.*AD 615 and AD 650, based on peat samples and organic material found in the *vallum* ditch, this was at the very time that Iona was reaching the apex of its influence and power: it was at this time, during the abbacy of Ségéne, that Lindisfarne was founded, the Ionan mission to the English started, and Columba's miracles were first being written down.[248] So it has been suggested that the movement of arable agriculture was in response to growth of the community as it reached its peak. Yet in AD 635 a major snowfall in central Ireland was recorded in the *Iona Chronicle* that led to many deaths.[249] This was just one weather event that signalled the deterioration of the regional climate. Between this snowfall, and the mention Adomnán made of a mill-stone (signalling the potential presence of a watermill on Iona), there had also been a

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[245] *Córus Bésgnai*, ed. Liam Breatnach, *Córus Bésgnai: An Old Irish Law Tract on the Church and Society* (Dublin, 2017), §§38-9; *cf*. T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Pastoral Role of the Church in the Early Irish Laws', in John Blair and Richard Sharpe (eds.), *Pastoral Care Before the Parish* (Leicester, 1992), pp. 63-77, esp. 67-73, on the competing models of offerings due to the Church, and obligations due from the Church. Ecclesiastical sites in England have been claimed as early economic innovators towards a system of exploitative, mainly arable, production, but, even if Irish evidence is deployed to back up this narrative, Ireland does not neatly follow this trend: Charles Doherty, 'The Monastic Town in Early Medieval Ireland', in H.B. Clarke and Anngret Simms (eds.), *The Comparative History of Urban Origins in Non-Roman Europe: Ireland, Wales, Denmark, Germany, Poland and Russia from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford, 1985), p. 55; John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 252-3; Rosamond Faith, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship* (London, 1997), pp. 15-16; *cf*. Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, pp. 140-6.
[246] Barber, 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', pp. 356-7; Bohncke, 'The Pollen Diagram from Ditch 1', pp. 346-8.
[247] *VC*, §§i.37, ii.28.
[248] *AU*, §632.4; *HE*, §iii.3; Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 13-26; *VC*, §§i.1, i.3.
[249] *AU*, §635.4.

series of major storms and another snowfall in AD 670 that caused a famine.[250] These weather events, combined with a growing community, and a regional environmental context that made livestock raising inefficient, may have pushed Iona's monks into a shift towards more arable agriculture.

It may have also made the monastery seek out ways to extract more resources from nearby communities. The important daughter foundation of Iona on the island of Tiree was close at hand.[251] Tiree was an island with a large amount of arable land that made it possible to support a number of monasteries, even being known as 'the low-lying land of barley'.[252] A story in Adomnán's *Life* even has Columba order that grain and a 'fat beast' be sent from Tiree to feed a funeral on Coll.[253] This may simply have been because Tiree was closer to Coll than Iona, but perhaps it shows the important agricultural role workers on Tiree played to produce food for the mother house.[254] Another story might further suggest the extractive attitude Iona took, not only to its daughter monasteries, but also to local farmers. Columba sent out his monks to collect withies from a local farmer, clearly at his displeasure, and gifted the man barley in return despite it being long past the planting season.[255] The ocean was the key infrastructure for Iona to deliver this programme of extraction. Moreover, many of Columba's journeys sailing around the kingdom of Dál Riata seem to have featured him extracting hospitality from local farmers, a privilege expected by Ionan monks and abbots in Adomnán's own time.[256] I wonder if this practice may have been aimed at decreasing the agricultural burden on Iona's own

[250] *AU*, §§658.3, 670.1, 685.1, 691.5.
[251] *VC*, §ii.15.
[252] Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 223; Reeves, *Life of Saint Columba*, pp. 48, n. b, 78-79, n. k (notes to §§i.13, i.41); *VC*, §§i.36, iii.8.
[253] *VC*, §i.41: *mittit ut eidem furi quoddam pingue pecus et vi. modios novissima mittat munera.*
[254] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 182.
[255] *VC*, §ii.3.
[256] *VC*, §§ii.17, ii.19-21, ii.45.

land during summer: allowing the monks working on the island to stockpile resources, so that the monks out claiming hospitality could return to the island and hunker-down during winter. Bede certainly looked down on this practice as the behaviour of freeloaders.[257]

This, at its core, shows the weakness in applying Devroey's ideas to the agricultural programme of early medieval Iona: techniques of extraction and surplus generation also could follow a logic of making the Ionan community resilient to climatic shocks and food shortages. Recent studies have similarly explored how communities became resilient to climate shocks through the redistribution of surpluses, trade, and extra-community bonding.[258] Agricultural techniques and responses to climatic changes were not always zero-sum games played between extractors, who were invulnerable to food shortages, and producers, who bore the brunt of climate disruptions.[259] Iona was a high-status site, involved in primary production, which showed evidence of vulnerability to agricultural stress and food shortages. It was a community that used a diversity of agricultural methods, technological advances, and social relationships to hedge against those vulnerabilities. Devroey has however highlighted the most important agricultural technique in the eyes of Iona's monks and medieval people more generally, something ignored in almost all studies of socio-agricultural responses to climate change and weather events: an engagement with the divine. This dynamic also underwrote the relationship Iona had with the surrounding communities that supported the monastery's existence.

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[257] *HE*, §iv.4.
[258] Degroot *et al*., 'Towards a Rigorous Understanding of Societal Responses to Climate Change', p. 545; Peregrine, 'Social Resilience to Climate: A Replication Study', pp. 561-71; *id*., 'Social Resilience to Nuclear Winter', pp. 60-4.
[259] This reduces the dynamic range of interactions between communities to a single, unimaginative, balance sheet showing only one form of exchange: Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, p. 108.

The stories in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* show an intense interest in the relationship between agricultural productivity and St Columba. This could be on Iona itself: by Columba's blessing, no snakes on the island of Iona could harm the monks or their cattle;[260] a demon hiding in a pail of milk was banished by the sign of the cross;[261] and most significantly, rain was brought in the middle of a major drought.[262] The story of the drought is told from the perspective of Adomnán himself.[263] The abbot and the community were worried that they had somehow transgressed God's ways, bringing a curse on themselves as proclaimed in Leviticus: 'your labour shall be spent in vain, the ground shall not bring forth her increase, nor the trees yield their fruit'.[264] They set about carrying the relics of Columba, his books and his tunic, around the sown fields.[265] Seeking out the closest portal between Iona and heaven, they climbed the small knoll known as the Hill of Angels, where Columba had conversed with heavenly beings. By reading from Columba's books and invoking the saint's name their prayers were successful.[266] Rain not only saved the crops on the island, but the reader is told that the harvest was also saved for the many communities that surrounded Iona on that same occasion.[267] This suggested that Iona's monks and elders were reacting to a larger subsistence crisis, and that Columba was being positioned by Adomnán as the mediator between God's judgement and the wider region.

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[260] *VC*, §ii.28,
[261] *VC*, §ii.16.
[262] *VC*, §ii.44.
[263] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 332.
[264] Lev. 26:20.
[265] Adomnán and the monks of Iona may have been inspired by an episode in Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, but the relics chosen say something about Columban sanctity: Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, §iii.15; Jennifer O'Reilly, 'Reading the Scriptures in the Life of Columba', in Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba*, pp. 90-4; *VC*, §ii.44.
[266] *VC*, §iii.16.
[267] *VC*, §ii.44.

While alive, this role had Columba make bitter fruits sweet, make the lochs run with salmon, and crops grow faster, but he continued as a crucial patron long after his death.[268] Stories leading up to Columba's passing foreshadowed and forewarned his absence from the community, and that the spiritual power and holiness he exemplified might leave.[269] When stories from the *Life* have been used to exemplify the agricultural productivity of the island, this shift in Columba's presence has not been accounted for.[270] Columba was the saint who rid the island of snakes, made Iona a monastic Eden, and offered a vision of holiness that his monks could strive for.[271] Columba brought the bread of life to his monks, and when he rejoiced at the presence of two mounds of grain in the barn this was not a sign that this surplus was normal, but happiness that when the saint died his monks would not be left wanting in his absence.[272]

Jennifer O'Reilly and Gilbert Márkus have argued that a major purpose of Adomnán's *Life of Columba* was to communicate that the spiritual authority of Columba (as a mediator between God and the community of Iona, and between God and those who honoured Columba) was transmitted to his community and abbatial successors after his death.[273] The argument might then follow that the powers

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[268] *VC*, §§ii.2-3, ii.19.
[269] *VC*, §i.2, ii.28, iii.22-3
[270] Jones *et al.*, 'Social Transformations and Crisis on Iona', p. 184. Kathleen Hughes like me sees this story as revealing 'economic necessity' and 'hardship' rather than productivity: *The Church in Early Irish Society*, p. 61.
[271] Márkus, 'Iona: Monks, Pastors and Missionaries', pp. 121-6; *VC*, §ii.28.
[272] *VC*, §iii.23. Moses ordered the Israelites to gather double the daily portion of the *manna* from heaven to prepare for the sabbath as they journeyed through the desert: Ex. 16:29; O'Reilly, 'Reading the Scriptures in the Life of Columba', pp. 99-100.
[273] Jennifer O'Reilly, 'Adomnán and the Art of Teaching Spiritual Sons', in Wooding *et al.* (eds.), *Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, pp. 70-83; Márkus, 'Four Blessings and a Funeral', pp. 4-5. Jonas of Bobbio used his *Life of Columbanus* similarly to transmit the charismatic authority of Columbanus and his holy body into the institutional power and control Columbanus's monasteries had over their estates and property: Albrecht Diem, *The Pursuit of Salvation. Unity, Space, and Discipline in Early Medieval Monasticism: with a Critical Edition and Translation of the Regula cuiusdam ad Uirgines* (Turnhout, 2021), p. 307.

granted to the saint by God would also be transmitted down to Adomnán,[274] but I think the more precise claim being made in the *Life* is that Columba's patronage of his community and his relationship with God was ongoing, effective, and evident. When Adomnán offered examples of when the Ionan community bent nature for their agricultural benefit, such as during the drought, the presence of Columba and his mediation with God is emphasised, not the power of the monks or abbot.[275] Adomnán here is only claiming a line of communication for himself and his monks to their patron saint, though certainly control over Columba's relics afforded them a great deal of power over his holiness. Both the *Amrae Coluimb Chille* and Adomnán's *Life* claimed that Columba's relics were used to control the weather.[276] The most obvious context for this control might have been to assist the agricultural productivity of the region, but the relics were also used to give travellers safe voyages around the Hebrides, and Columba was established as a particular patron for efficient voyages even if his relics were not present.[277] For the archipelago that surrounded Iona, the sea was the major method of movement. These stories appealed to a people who could see the particular benefits of Columba's power in their ocean-going lives. A major goal of Adomnán's *Life* may have been to establish beyond doubt that Columba's cult delivered for Hebridean society.

While God and Columba protected communities from divine punishment, both could also sanction punishment. This is best seen in stories featuring the plague

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[274] Márkus, 'Four Blessings and a Funeral', pp. 4-5, n. 11: I think it is notable that Márkus highlighted more the rights and ideals embodied by Columba as those claimed by Adomnán, rather than any wonder-working powers. There is however a tradition in Glen Lyon of Adomnán stopping a plague: Anouk Busset and Sofia Evemalm-Graham, 'Places of Belief in Medieval Glen Lyon and Beyond: Onomastic and Archaeological Perspectives', *Journal of Scottish Name Studies*, 14 (2020), pp. 88-9, 108-10; William Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926), pp. 270-1.
[275] *VC*, §ii.44.
[276] *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §vii.18-19; *VC*, §ii.45.
[277] *VC*, §ii.45.

in Adomnán's *Life*. In one, Columba entered spiritual battle against demons, driving them away from Iona.[278] Unfortunately, they moved on to the monasteries on the Island of Tiree, attacking Iona's daughter house of Mag Luinge with deadly plagues. By the prayers and fasting ordered by Baithéne their abbot, only one of their brethren died, while the other monasteries on Tiree were devastated.[279] Columba had earlier prophesied Godly judgement on the founder of one these monasteries called *Artchain*: either Columba or Adomnán thought their holiness was slack.[280] Columba's favour with God compared to other monasteries was also exemplified during the onslaught of the Justinianic Plague: while much of Britain and Ireland were devastated, neither Pictland nor Dál Riata were greatly affected. Adomnán explained that,

> Although neither people are lacking in great sin, which often provokes the Eternal Judge to anger, as of yet He has patiently endured and spared both. To whom else but Saint Columba is attributed this God-given grace, whose monasteries are founded across the territories of both peoples and is greatly honoured by both until the present time? But what I am now about to say is, I judge, not to be heard without sorrow, because there are very many senseless people in both kingdoms who ungratefully and wickedly, unaware that by the prayers of saints they were defended from plagues, squander the patience of God.[281]

Adomnán went on in the same episode to claim that it was through Columba's protection he was able to visit England twice in the very depths of this plague. David

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[278] *VC*, §iii.8.
[279] On the location of Mag Luinge, and the potential other religious communities situated on Tiree, see Carolyn Jeanette McNamara, 'Tracing the Community of Comgall Across the North Channel: An Interdisciplinary Investigation of Early Medieval Monasteries at Bangor, Applecross, Lismore, and Tiree' (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2021), pp. 284-343.
[280] *VC*, §i.36.
[281] *VC*, §ii.46: *Et quamvis utrorumque populorum non desint grandia peccata, quibus plerumque ad iracondiam aeternus prouocatur iudex, utrisque tamen huc usque patienter ferens ipse pepercit. Cui alio itaque haec tribuitur gratia a deo conlata nisi sancto Columbae, cuius monasteria intra utrorumque populorum terminos fundata ab utrisque usque ad praesens tempus valde sunt honorificata? Sed hoc quod nunc dicturi sumus ut arbitramur non sine gemitu audiendum est, quia sunt plerique in utrisque populis valde stolidi qui se sanctorum orationibus a morbis defensos nescientes ingrati dei patientia male abutuntur.*

Woods has argued that Adomnán believed that Europe, and especially the English and the Irish, were divinely punished because they had a adopted a different dating of Easter to the Ionan Church.[282] While possibly connected to this issue, I think the attention of Adomnán was more local, and focused on the communities of Dál Riata and Pictland: he was offering a broader warning to those in these kingdoms who would disrespect or abandon the authority of Columba and his monastery.[283] In other miracles among the people of Dál Riata, Columba punished those who rejected his authority and help, reducing them to destitution: often agricultural poverty.[284] If they persecuted the friends of Columba or his churches, they were even punished with death.[285] Only thirteen years after Adomnán's death, the king Nechtan expelled all the Ionan monks from Pictland.[286] Adomnán's warning may have been in fear of a Pictish rejection of Columba.

Columba's patronage to the people surrounding Iona, his ability to bring both agricultural bounty, and to let loose God's judgement leads back to the agricultural programme of the monastery and its strategies of sustainability. Crucial benefactors of Columba's patronage were the most local communities to Iona in Dál Riata, the Cenél Loairn.[287] Among these people Columba provided fast growing grain, increased the number of cattle, and filled the lochs with fish.[288] If Iona relied significantly on imported food to survive, it needed the support of these farmers and hunters. Moreover, Adomnán needed to communicate to them that the land's agricultural productivity and its protection from disease came from a reciprocal

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[282] David Woods, 'Adomnán, Plague and the Easter Controversy', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 40 (2011), pp. 1-13; see also, Nathalie Stalmans, 'La Place de la Maladie dans la Pensée d'Adomnán – Réalité et Symbole', in Carey, Kock, and Lambert (eds.), *Ildánach Ildírech*, pp. 245-54.
[283] Here I am with Gilbert Márkus: 'Iona: Monks, Pastors and Missionaries', pp. 135-7.
[284] *VC*, §§ii.20, ii.37.
[285] *VC*, §§ii.22, ii.24.
[286] *AU*, §717.4.
[287] See further the discussion below, Chapter Two, pp. 101-8.
[288] *VC*, §§ii.3, ii.19-21.

relationship with the monastery of Iona and its patron saint. There were churches on Tiree not under Columba's authority, and many were dismissing Columba's protective role over both the kingdom of Dál Riata and Pictland. Recent scholarship has clarified that Iona was not the only source of spiritual power and pastoral care in Dál Riata at this time, but just one community – one foreign community – jockeying for recognition and support.[289] There were other religious patrons, 'hinge-men', that the people could turn to if Columba's power did not deliver for them.[290]

Like Iona, the people of Dál Riata faced a marginal climate dominated by the effects of the ocean. Like Iona, these people were experiencing major changes in their climate over the course of the monastery's early history. Like Iona, they would have faced seasons of ruined crops, cattle plagues, raiders, and storms. They may have questioned Columba's ability as their holy patron and mediator with God.[291] The evidence presented above suggests that Iona needed these people to subvert the environmental marginality that challenged the monastic community. It was one strategy among many to make the monastery agriculturally sustainable in the face of major climatic vulnerabilities. The image of the community as 'having enough to eat and more' is not a subtle appreciation of both the agricultural challenges faced by the monastery, and the theological meaning behind their ideal of productivity.[292]

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[289] Márkus, 'Iona: Monks, Pastors and Missionaries', pp. 126-9; Fraser, 'Strangers on the Clyde', pp. 102-20.
[290] Peter Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971), p. 86.
[291] Tírechán, for instance, claims that Clonmacnoise was able to pilfer some of Patrick's churches in the aftermath of the plague: *Collectanea*, ed. and trans. Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), §25.2. Did they lie empty? Or did Clonmacnoise offer better protective patronage to the local communities?
[292] Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, pp. 49-50. Autarky was a myth and ideal deployed throughout history: Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, pp. 112-15.

Conclusion

Archaeologists of early medieval Lindisfarne have argued that the monastery, though seemingly located in a marginal environment, turned itself into a sustainable community through the estate lands around the island.[293] It adapted itself socially to overcome problems caused by its climate and geography, and Iona did something similar. The early medieval community faced a harsh ocean climate in the middle of a climatic downturn that seriously impacted its agricultural productivity. Archaeological excavations of the monastery have shown that the monks adopted a variety of strategies to turn their marginal island home into one of the most successful monasteries of the age. To do this, they spread agricultural risk across many subsistence strategies, they invested in technological advances to make their arable production more effective, and crucially, they looked outside their island to supplement what they could not produce themselves. To look outside the island meant engaging with the connective power of the ocean. This included fishing, hunting on distant estates, extracting renders, obtaining hospitality, and developing reciprocal relationships with the communities that surrounded their island. This was not always enough, and there is some evidence that Iona still experienced periods of shortage.

This vision of Iona that I have put forward is set against an assumption that the monastery was highly productive and 'living off the fat of the land'. Instead, when Adomnán depicted moments of agricultural bounty, he was constructing an Edenic ideal that was realised on Iona because of Columba's holiness and his connection to the divine: Adomnán and his monks lived the post-lapsarian condition

[293] Kevin Walsh, 'Early Medieval Landscapes: Lindisfarne – A Case Study' (PhD Thesis, University of Leicester, 1993), pp. 248-60; Tony Brown *et al.*, 'Marginality, Multiple Estates and Environmental Change', in Mills and Coles (eds.), *Life on the Edge: Human Settlement and Marginality*, pp. 139-48; see also the discussion above in Chapter Four, pp. 242-3.

that came with the saint's passing. They revered Columba and engaged his patronage because, at times, they struggled in making their monastic mission liveable. Significantly, the communities that surrounded Iona also looked to St Columba and his successors for patronage and divine mediation to secure environmental harmony and agricultural productivity. While scholarship has often focused on changes in agricultural programmes and social systems as a response to the climate and environmental pressures, it is important not to ignore the essential role of the holy and divine in bringing fertility to the land. The belief in Columba's patronage may have been strained in the face of environmental hardship, and I have suggested that Adomnán's *Life of Columba* looked to prove that Columba's mediation was still present.

The forms of sanctity in insular hagiographies have previously been divided into two models: the wonder-working controller of the environment, and the socio-political agent.[294] A saint like Cuthbert, the bishop Lindisfarne, with his island hermitage on Farne was in the first mould. He could still storms, heal the paralysed, and even miraculously command otters to warm his feet after a swim.[295] St Wilfrid, bishop of York, was a proto-typical political saint. His sanctity stemmed from acts like arguing the Roman case at the Synod of Whitby, or disputing kings who impinged on his ecclesiastical rights.[296] I would question the divide between these two models through Columba's role in Adomnán's *Life* and in his society: miraculous control over the environment was arguably one of the most politically significant markers of sanctity. If people ceased to believe that the *patronus* carried divine favour, they could seek a mediator who did, with massive socio-economic

[294] William Trent Foley, *Images of Sanctity in Eddius Stephanus' Life of Bishop Wilfrid, an Early English Saint's Life* (Lewiston, 1992), pp. 16-18, 107-31.
[295] Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, §§3, 10; *Vita Cuthberti Anonymae*, §§ii.3, iv.17.
[296] *HE*, §iii.23; Stephen of Ripon, *Vita S. Wilfrithi*, §§10, 14, 45-46

implications for the community built upon their support. The Irish applied a similar scheme to their secular rulers,[297] and 'good' Christian kings were expected to play a similar role as mediators between their people, God, and the environment elsewhere in Europe.[298]

The ocean was the primary environmental force that dictated the climate and challenges to agricultural sustainability that are the focus of this chapter. The ocean isolated the Ionan community for long stretches, yet it also opened up the monastery to its surrounding society, and to the resources that allowed it to relieve Iona's marginality. The social bonds that maintained the community would not have been possible without the ocean. To reinforce those bonds, Adomnán may have appealed to the ocean environment the monks of Iona shared with the communities that surrounded them. Many of Columba's miracles, even after death, feature him granting safe journeys to the monks of Iona.[299] More dramatically, they featured Columba himself caught in the dangers of the ocean, bailing out the boat in fear of drowning.[300] In one story, when raiders attacked a farmer of the Cenél Loairn, the saint called down an ocean storm to drown the marauders.[301] This was a wonderworker of the Dálriatan ocean-ways that was not to be crossed. The chapter following argues that these local ocean-ways revealed the priorities of Iona and its abbots, and signals what level of ocean connectivity was the most important to the lives of these monks.

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[297] *Audacht Morainn*, ed. and trans. Fergus Kelly (Dublin, 1976), §§12, 17-20.
[298] The precedent for these beliefs is ultimately Biblical: Lev. 26:3-40; 1 Sam. 15:10-35; Devroey, *La Nature et le Roi*, pp. 397-426; Julia Smith, *Europe After Rome: A New Cultural History* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 241-52.
[299] *VC*, §ii.15, ii.34, ii.42, ii.45
[300] *VC*, §§ii.12-13.
[301] *VC*, §ii.22.

# CHAPTER TWO

*Seaways and Ocean Movement*

Seaways have been a powerful force of connectivity since the pre-history of Britain and Ireland. It was up through the Irish Sea that the first Neolithic settlers of Ireland and Western Scotland arrived, and it was through networks of ocean movement that these same settlers exchanged goods, ideas, and people.[1] The continuing interconnectivity of the British Isles was maintained by sea links.[2] In the area most relevant to my study, seaways stitched the kingdom of Dál Riata together: a political and cultural bridge between the north of Ireland and the west of Scotland.[3] Beyond this insular interconnectivity, seaways also connected Britain and Ireland to the larger networks of trade along the Atlantic coasts. The foundational work on these sea-lanes was done by Charles Thomas, revealing how goods and trade connected the British Isles to the Mediterranean after the fall of the Western Roman Empire.[4] More recent scholarship has taken up this subject and contributed substantially to the historical understanding of these sea-lanes.[5]

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[1] Alison Sheridan, 'Neolithic Connections Along and Across the Irish Sea', in Vicki Cummings and Chris Fowler (eds.), *The Neolithic of the Irish Sea: Materiality and Traditions of Practice* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 10, 12-14. Pre-historic patterns of ocean movement came to be associated with the seafaring of Irish saints like Columba: *e.g.* Emrys George Bowen *Saints, Seaways and Settlements in the Celtic Lands*, 2nd edn (Cardiff, 1977), pp. 76-80. This model has since, however, come under a great deal of criticism: Jonathan Wooding, 'Island and Coastal Churches in Medieval Wales and Ireland', in Karen Jankulak and Jonathan Wooding (eds.), *Ireland and Wales in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 2007), pp. 214-18.

[2] See the distribution of the 'marigold' stones of Wexford as an example of cultural links engendered by the Irish Sea: Kate Colbert, 'Artistic and Cultural Transmission Across the Irish Sea: The "Marigold" Stones of Wexford and their Welsh Connections', in Cynthia Thickpenny *et al.* (eds.), *Peopling Insular Art: Practice, Performance, Perception* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 71-83.

[3] Campbell, 'Were the Scots Irish?', pp. 290-1; Woolf, 'Ancient Kindred?', pp. 1-11.

[4] Charles Thomas, 'Imported Pottery in Dark-Age Western Britain', *Medieval Archaeology*, 3 (1959), pp. 89-111.

[5] Ewan Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland, AD 400-800* (York, 2007); Maria Duggan, *Links to Late Antiquity: Ceramic Exchange and Contacts on the Atlantic Seaboard in the 5th to 7th centuries* (Oxford, 2018); Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*.

The sea was also the ecological infrastructure used by insular ecclesiasts to build and maintain their social network, and to project their influence. Kathleen Hughes called the ocean a 'highway' for Irish monks, connecting abbots to their far-away, and sometimes isolated, monastic *paruchia*.[6] David Dumville has even suggested that these monastic sea-networks could be called thalassocracies, 'sea-powers', a term borrowed from Herodotus.[7] The two most famous saints associated with Ireland, St Patrick and St Columba, each made ocean journeys that crossed the ethnic and political boundary that was the Irish Sea: the sea offered a means of breaking down boundaries as much as it created them. St Columba's self-declared ocean exile seems far less significant if one considers the connectivity provided by the ocean. The Columban foundations at Derry, Durrow, Hinba,[8] Iona, Lindisfarne, and Tiree, were linked together by the ocean. The interconnectivity provided to the Ionan *familia* by the ocean is best seen in the *Life of Columba*. In this text I have counted 134 journeys made by the saint and others, 85% of which involved ocean movement.[9]

These journeys can be broken down into geographical zones for further study: local, regional, and global. The local area of ocean movement is broadly defined as the territory of the kingdom of Dál Riata. Regional journeys are those that took place in other insular kingdoms, or those that crossed the political and ethnic boundaries of the insular world (for example, from the north of Dál Riata to Ireland).[10] Any global journeys are simply those made outside the insular world:

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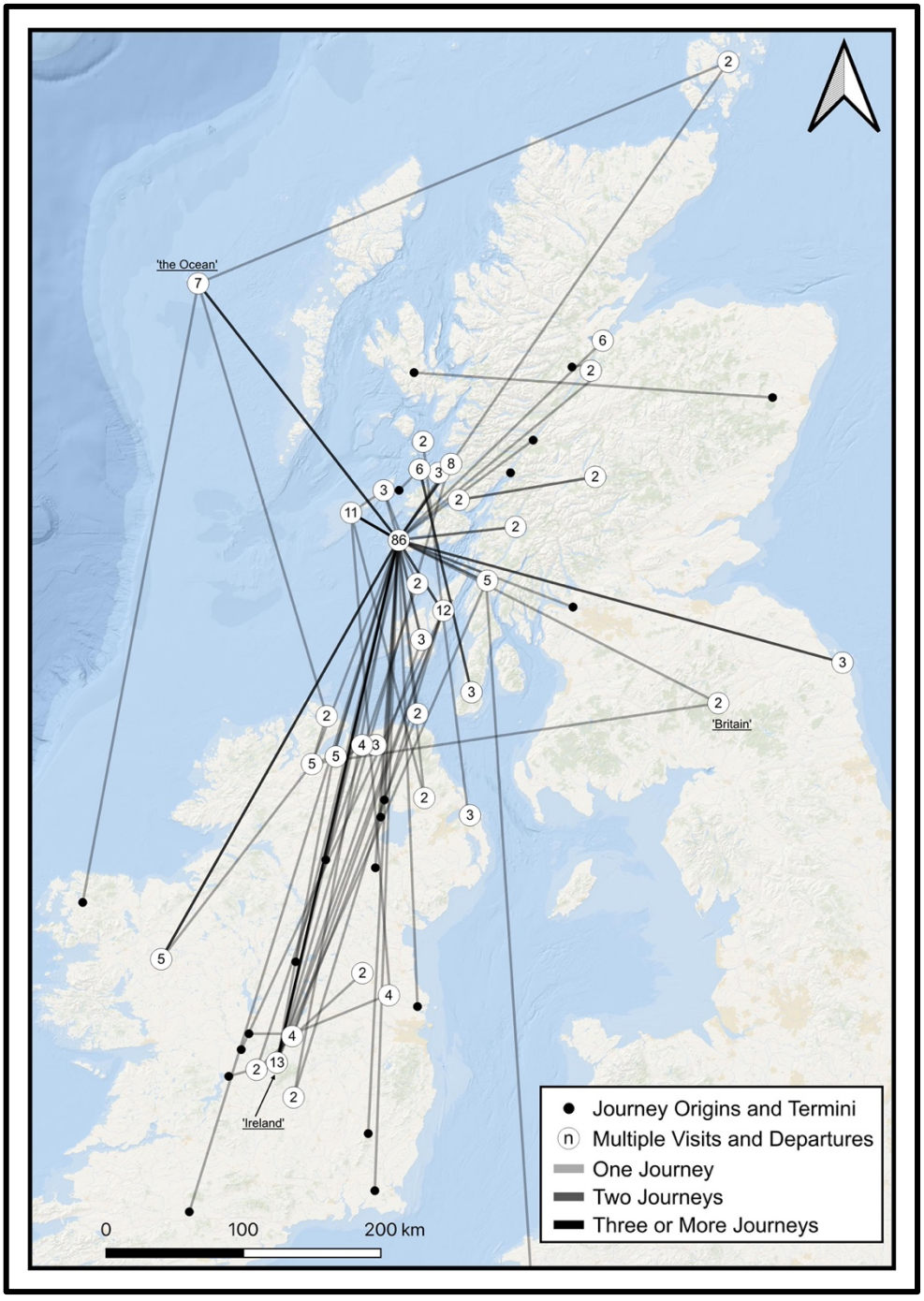
[6] Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, p. 81.
[7] Herodotus, *The Histories*, ed. Carolyn Dewald, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford, 1998), §iii.122; David Dumville, 'The North-Atlantic Monastic Thalassocracy: Sailing to the Desert in Early Mediaeval Insular Spirituality', in Barbara E. Crawford (ed.), *The Papar in the North Atlantic: Environment and History* (St Andrews, 2002), pp. 121-31, republished in his *Celtic Essays, 2001-2007*, ii, pp. 73-81.
[8] On Hinba, see Chapter Four, p. 228 n. 165.
[9] See the Appendix for a list of these journeys in the *Life*.
[10] *VC*, §i.12




*Map 3. Journeys in Adomnán's* Life of Columba.

my view is that Iona's monks saw journeys into the unknown ocean and any contact with the world outside their archipelagic home as movement on a global scale.[11] All

[11] Jan De Vries, 'The Limits of Globalization in the Early Modern World', *The Economic History Review*, 63:3 (2010), pp. 710-33, is critical of anything called a global world before the early modern period, localising trade and mobility. Nicholas Purcell sees even this fragmented world of pre-modern

of this presumes that Adomnán's *Life* presents the reader with an accurate and unadulterated representation of how Columba and the Columban community used their ocean networks. This would be a naïve way to use the text, and, as is shown in this chapter, it is obvious that Adomnán's distinctive view of his seascape is on display. This does not mean that the *Life of Columba* lacks any minable detail for how Ionan seaways operated – it is our best source for the form and function of Ionan ocean movement. Moreover, the conflict between Adomnán's vision and the potential reality bears witness to tensions inherent in Iona's network of ocean links. To explore these implications however, this must all be prefaced with an overview of the sailing technology available to the monks of Iona. This opening section does not plan to be exhaustive, instead it establishes some assumptions about Iona's boats. These can then be used when moving forward to discuss the ocean movement described in the *Life of Columba* and other primary sources.

Ionan Boats

The Irish currach, constructed by stretching hides over a wooden frame, is the boat most associated with early voyages of the insular Celts. Gildas first brought the word *curucus* (*emergunt certatim de curucis*) into the corpus of Latin when discussing the raids of the Irish on the west coast of Britain, but Julius Caesar also referenced the use of small hide-covered craft by the British, and even built currachs for his soldiers to cross rivers in Italy.[12] The debate on the ocean-going abilities of the currach has largely focused on the boat of St Brendan the Navigator and the

global exchange as an intelligible form of globality; the monks of Iona would have certainly seen these movements as, to a degree, global: 'Unnecessary Dependences: Illustrating Circulation in Pre-modern Large-scale History', in Belich *et al*., *The Prospect of Global History*, pp. 65-79.

[12] Julius Caesar, *The Civil War*, trans. John Carter (Oxford, 2008), §i.54; Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom, *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, §19.1.

journeys he could have made using one.[13] In the *Voyage of St Brendan*, at its latest a tenth-century text but with good evidence it can be traced back to the seventh century,[14] one can see how the saint constructed his currach:

> St Brendan and those who were with him, having retrieved iron tools, built a small light boat, ribbed, and supported with yew, just as is the custom in those parts, and they covered it with cow hides and tanned it with the bark of oak. They smeared all the outside joints of the hides with butter; and they placed two other prepared hides from those of the boat into the boat, along with forty days of supplies, the butter needed for preparing the hides covering the boat, and other tools which suit the necessities of human life. They placed a mast fastened in the middle of the boat, and a sail, and the other things which are necessary for the steering of a ship.[15]

Scholars have suggested that the saint used this boat to reach Iceland and Greenland, but some have even suggested that the Irish, in the person of Brendan and his monks, were the first Europeans to discover America (possibly even traveling as far south as Mexico).[16] This led Tim Severin to construct his own version of a medieval currach and attempt these voyages himself, reaching the coast of Newfoundland after stops in the Faeroes, Iceland, and Greenland.[17] Despite Severin's achievement, the accuracy of his currach has been questioned by some, and the real abilities of such

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[13] Jonathan Wooding, 'Monastic Voyaging and the *Nauigatio*', in *id*. (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 227-9.

[14] Questions surrounding the date of the text have resurfaced in the wake of Giovanni Orlandi and Rossana E. Guglielmetti's new critical edition, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani: Alla Scoperta dei Segreti Meravigliosi del Mondo* (Florence, 2014), cii-cxix: they have come down on the seventh-century Irish origin of the text; see similarly David Dumville, 'Two Approaches to the Dating of *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*', in Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage*, pp. 130-2; *cf.* Michael Herren's review of Orlandi and Guglielmetti in *The Journal of Medieval Latin*, 26 (2016), pp. 383-7; and Nicholas Thyr, 'The *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*: A Text from Ninth-Century Milan', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 79 (2020), pp. 1-18.

[15] *Navigatio S. Brendani*, ed. and trans. Orlandi and Guglielmetti, §4.3-6: *Sanctus Brendanus et qui cum eo errant, acceptis ferramentis, fecerunt naviculam levissimam, costatam et columnatam ex ivo, sicut mos est in illis partibus, et cooperuerunt illam coriis bovinis atque rubricatis in cortice roborino. Et linierunt foras omnes iucturas pallium ex butiro; et miserunt duas alias paraturas navis de aliis coriis intus in navim, et dispendia quadraginta dierum, et butirum ad pelles praeparandas ad cooperimentum navis, et cetera utensilia quae ad usum vitae humanae pertinent. Arborem posuerunt in medio navis fixam et velum et cetera quae ad gubernationem navis pertinent.*

[16] See Eugene Fingerhut, *Who First Discovered America?: A Critique of Writings on Pre-Columbian Voyages* (Claremont CA, 1984), pp. 29-42 for an overview of some of these claims; Wooding, 'Monastic Voyaging and the *Nauigatio*', p. 228.

[17] Tim Severin, *The Brendan Voyage* (London, 1990), pp. 11-15.

hide-covered crafts in the waters of the Atlantic have been doubted by others.[18] On balance, and given the number of contemporary references to currachs, it is best to simply say that hide-covered boats were capable, and they were used by the Irish in the pre-Viking era to make journeys in the North Atlantic.[19]

Evidence also suggests that there was a wide variety of crafts available and known in early medieval Ireland, all of which could have been used by Iona's monks. Adomnán, drawing on Isidore of Seville, names many possible craft that were used in the insular world in his *Life of Columba*: *alnus*, *barca*, *caupallus*, *cimba*, *longa navis*, *navicula*, *navis*, *oneraria navis*, *scafa*.[20] This may just have been rhetorical variation. Jonathan Wooding has remarked that using hagiographies to glean practical details regarding the construction, abilities, and range of medieval Irish boats, is confusing literary symbol with reality.[21] The currach was the stock boat used in traditional Irish voyage literature, the *immrama* (literally, 'rowings about'), and in the penitential voyages of saints. The animal skin covering of boats in saints' stories, supposedly their most essential characteristic, could have simply been a genre feature or used for metaphorical impact.[22] Wooding has highlighted that other hagiographies featuring saints setting off in boats with hulls made of stone or glass, as well as animal skin.[23]

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[18] John J. O'Meara, 'In the Wake of the Saint: *The Brendan Voyage*, an Epic Crossing of the Atlantic by Leather Boat', in Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage*, pp. 111-12; John De Courcy Ireland, *Ireland and the Irish in Maritime History* (Dun Laoghaire, 1986), pp. 38-42.
[19] I follow here G.J. Marcus, *The Conquest of the North Atlantic* (Woodbridge, 1980), pp. 24-32.
[20] Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, pp. 9-13; Reeves, *The Life of St Columba*, p. 176, nn. a-b (notes to §ii.45); Isidore, *Etymologiae*, trans. Stephen A. Barney *et al*., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge, 2006), §xix.1. A useful handlist of words for boats described by Adomnán is provided by T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Iona and the Sea', pp. 16-17.
[21] Jonathan Wooding, 'St Brendan's Boat: Dead Hides and the Living Sea', in Carey, Herbert, and Ó Riain (eds.), *Saints and Scholars*, pp. 79-80.
[22] Wooding, 'St Brendan's Boat: Dead Hides and the Living Sea', pp. 88-92.
[23] Wooding, 'St Brendan's Boat: Dead Hides and the Living Sea', p. 79; Elissa R. Henken, *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 98-9; *Vita S. Petroci Antiquior*, ed. Paul Grosjean, 'Vie et Miracles de S. Petroc', *Analecta Bollandiana*, 74 (1956), §9, p. 493.

The sheer number of references to the currach still seems to suggest that it was common form of boat used in early medieval Ireland. The detail given in the *Voyage of St Brendan* certainly expressed some familiarity with this craft amongst the hagiography's readers and writer.[24] In fact, the currach had navigational advantages for the insular seaways. In shoals, estuaries, or in shallow waters, the flexibility of the hides made them durable.[25] Also, in the more turbulent waters of the ocean, flexibility may be more prised than a stronger, but more brittle boat.[26] Viking longships were similarly flexible so as to better navigate ocean waters.[27] The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recounted three men arriving from Ireland in a currach made of just two and a half hides.[28] Muirchú's *Life of Patrick* recalls the saint sending a criminal into the sea in a currach made of just one hide with no oars.[29] If the makers of the *Codex Amiatinus* allowed their parchment calves to mature, they could have supplied enough hides to build 1550, admittedly small, boats for local sailors.[30] Especially in tree-scarce environments like the Hebrides and Ireland, the extra amount of timber needed to construct the hulls of wooden vessels could have been saved for other purposes by choosing to build currachs instead.

One chapter in the *Life of Columba* is helpful in discussing some of the above points, providing some finer detail about the build of Iona's boats and their performance. In this story the monks of Iona made two journeys to source oak and

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[24] *Navigatio S. Brendani*, §4.
[25] Marcus, *The Conquest of the North Atlantic*, pp. 11-15; Strabo, *Geographica*, trans. Sarah Pothecary, *Strabo's Geography: A Translation for the Modern World* (Princeton NJ, 2024), §iii.3.7; Wooding, 'St Brendan's Boat: Dead Hides and the Living Sea', p. 81.
[26] Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, p. 12; *cf.* Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. Carolyn Hammond (Oxford, 2008), §iii.13.
[27] Paul Johnstone, *The Archaeology of Ships* (London, 1974), p. 72.
[28] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents, c.500-1042* (London, 1979), §891.
[29] The boat may have been so small, and potentially fragile, because it would show the merciful judgement of God if the criminal survived the ordeal: Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, ed. and trans. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts*, §i.23(22).13-15.
[30] Richard Gameson, 'The Cost of the Codex Amiatinus', *Notes and Queries*, 39:1 (1992), pp. 5-6.

pine timbers from inland Scotland near the River Shiel and Loch Moidart.[31] The first journey was to collect materials to build a 'long boat' among other craft, and to fetch materials for a 'great house'; the second was to gather materials to repair the monastery.[32] Sailing north to reach their destination the monks used small currachs and 'skiffs' (*scafis*). During the second journey, having retrieved these logs and paddling their way back to Iona in still waters, the monks were suddenly confronted with winds blowing against their bearing. This forced the monks to take shelter along the shoreline until the winds changed in their favour. This may have been a common occurrence. Adomnán mentions other situations where the Ionan monks were delayed in their ocean journeys because of contrary winds.[33] Miraculously, the power of St Columba from beyond the grave changed the winds, allowing the monks to raise their sails and quickly return to Iona.

The opposition of the currachs and 'skiffs', seemingly two smaller crafts, to the building of a 'long boat' suggests the potential variety of vessels available to the monks.[34] That this 'long boat' required timbers dragged overland might signal it was made of wood. G.J. Marcus argued however that these timbers could have been used to build a larger version of a currach, rather than a wooden longship.[35] This would certainly make the timbers last longer as a resource. In any case, despite any variety in the craft used, this episode shows that Ionan craft shared common limitations. Adomnán reveals that Iona's boats used square sails: when the winds changed, the

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[31] *Cf.* below, p. 103, n. 102.
[32] *VC*, §ii.45.
[33] *VC*, §ii.15. This formula may have also been a hagiographical trope: *Vita Cuthberti Anonymae*, §ii.4; Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, §11; Constantius of Lyon, *Vita Germani Episcopi Autissiodoensis*, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, MGH, SRM 7 (Hanover and Leipzig, 1920), §13; *id*., trans. F.R. Hoare, *The Western Fathers: Being the Lives of SS. Martin of Tours, Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo, Honoratus of Arles, and Germanus of Auxerre* (London, 1954). It also borrowed biblical terminology and imagery: Matt. 14:24; see also below, Chapter Three, pp. 166-7, 178-80.
[34] Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, pp. 9-10.
[35] Marcus, *The Conquest of the North Atlantic*, p. 9; G.J. Marcus, 'Factors in Early Celtic Navigation', *Études Celtiques*, 6:2 (1953), pp. 323-4; *cf.* Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, p. 18.

abbot ordered the monks to raise their 'sailyards in the likeness of a cross'.[36] Seemingly the norm for the period, this feature gave these boats terrible performances in headwinds.[37] One of the technological revolutions the Vikings brought to the insular world was the ability to tack, and use square sails when sailing, somewhat, into the wind.[38] This revolution increased the social capacity of ocean-ways: if you could not sail into the wind, you needed a large number of rowers, and so had less room for any cargo or people you might move from place to place for trade or travel.[39] These Irish craft may have also lacked strong keels, or the hull weight and displacement that made Viking craft more successful in windward sailing (though they also did not perform well).[40] The best strategy was for these sailors to wait for the winds to change. This story also shows that wind was the principal method of propulsion for these boats: 'in still weather the sailors were sweeping the sea with their oars'.[41] Once the winds turned in their favour, they hoisted the sails and returned to Iona 'without any physical effort'.[42] When oars feature in other stories, they seem to be used for tricky manoeuvres near the shore, and for avoiding dangers.[43] In another story however, a monk called Trénán made ready to sail but was short of one crew member. The saint assured him that he would

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[36] *VC*, §ii.45: *Iusi tum nautae antemnas crucis instar et vela protensis sublevant rudentibus*.
[37] Both Viking ships and the Broighter Boat seem to have used square sails: Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, p. 18; A.W. Farrell and S. Penny, with E.M. Jope, 'The Broighter Boat: A Reassessment', *Irish Archaeological Forum*, 2:2 (1975), p. 21.
[38] Martin Carver, 'Travels on the Sea and in the Mind', in Stacy S. Klein, William Schipper, and Shannon Lewis-Simpson (eds.), *The Maritime World of the Anglo-Saxons* (Tempe AZ, 2014), pp. 21-6.
[39] Alec Tilley, 'Sailing to Windward in the Ancient Mediterranean', *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 23:4 (1994), pp. 309-13.
[40] Johnstone, *The Archaeology of Ships*, p. 70; McGrail, 'Cross-Channel Seamanship and Navigation', pp. 209-301; Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, p. 18. G.J. Marcus ('Celtic Navigation', p. 315, and *id*, *The Conquest of the North Atlantic*, p. 9, n.14) sees a story in the *Life* as proof that these currachs had keels (§ii.42: *quae horribili impetu carinam et latera pupimque et proram ita forti feriebant percusura*).
[41] *VC*, §ii.45: *tranquilo nautis mare palmulis uerrentibus*.
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *VC*, §i.19; Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, §§i.22-3.

have ‘favourable and following winds’ all his journey: the implication is that having the extra rower would be necessary if the winds were not perfect.[44]

The *Life* highlights the crucial role of the wind in limiting the abilities of these boats, but tides and other weather would have also played a significant role in shaping when and where Iona’s monks could sail. A boat that could not sail effectively into the wind would find it very hard to fight against the tide.[45] The powerful Atlantic tidal streams are a feature that differentiated ocean movement compared to using Mediterranean sea-lanes.[46] Though predictable, the power of ocean tides meant that Iona’s monks would have to wait both for fair winds and favourable tides to make any journey.[47] Conditions like fog also increased the danger of capsizing or running aground.[48] The Irish legal code *Muirbretha* covered loot that could be gathered from shipwrecks on the Irish coast and suggests that these were common occurrences.[49] Fog and mist were particular hazards highlighted by Adomnán: in the story of St Columba leaving the fortress of King Bridei, a ‘great mist’ and contrary winds generated by Pictish wizards sought to delay the voyage of the saint.[50]

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[44] *VC*, §i.18. One should note that these ships were light enough for portaging and could not carry (but instead had to tow) substantial cargo. All these qualities hint at poor performance in winds and the necessity of full rowing crews: *VC*, §§i.34, ii.45; *cf.* Tilley, ‘Sailing to Windward in the Ancient Mediterranean’, pp. 309-13. The Broighter Boat and boat illustrations found on the Scottish isle of Inchmarnock (though in my view depicting Viking long ships or even later vessels) use many oars: Christopher Lowe, *Inchmarnock. An Early Historic Island Monastery and its Archaeological Landscape* (Edinburgh, 2008), pp. 152-6, 161-5; Daniel Atkinson, ‘The Inchmarnock Boat and Ship Graffiti’, in Lowe, *Inchmarnock*, pp. 277-83; Farrell and Penny, with Jope, ‘The Broighter Boat’, pp. 18-19. The image of a monk ‘rowing through the storm’ in *Adiutor Laborantium* also points to some windward rowing: ll. 18-19.

[45] Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, p. 18.

[46] Classical authors such as Strabo (*Geographica*, §iii.2:4-5) highlighted this difference; Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, p. 8.

[47] Tides are a focus of stories in Adomnán’s *Life*: *VC*, §ii.38; see also, Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, p. 8.

[48] Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, pp. 16-21.

[49] *Muirbretha*, ed. and trans. Charlene M. Eska, *Lost and Found in Early Irish Law: Aidbred*, *Heptad 64, and Muirbretha* (Leiden, 2022), pp. 324-5.

[50] *VC*, §ii.34. Referenced in this story by Adomnán, fog and mist were also dangers faced by St Germanus in his ocean crossing to Britain: Constantius of Lyons, *Vita Germani*, §13. Even the skilled

Despite the limitations, Iona's monks used their boats to build and maintain an extensive network of social contacts, linked by seaways, that can be seen in the journeys recorded in the *Life of Columba*;[51] but the abundance of the ocean journeying was not a mark of safety. The caution exercised by Iona's monks in the face of contrary winds shows that they could be highly skilled sailors while respecting a force that could, and did, lead to many deaths.[52] Testimony to the importance of the ocean to the early medieval monks of Iona is that they built such an extensive social network, connected by sea-lanes, in the face of these technological restrictions and mortal dangers.

Dál Riata Archipelagos

The kingdom of Dál Riata was an archipelago-kingdom linked by seaways. Its Irish territories could be found on the coasts of modern Co. Antrim, and its Scottish territories extended from Kintyre northwards to the Ardnamurchan peninsula, including much of the Inner Hebrides.[53] The *Míniugud Senchasa Fher nAlban*, surveying Dál Riata's political make-up in the seventh century, numbers the raisable troops from different lineages by the boats they could provide to the fleet.[54]

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Vikings feared fog which could cause *hafvilla*, the loss of one's course at sea: G.J. Marcus, '*Hafvilla*: A Note on Norse Navigation', *Speculum*, 30:4 (1955), pp. 602-3.

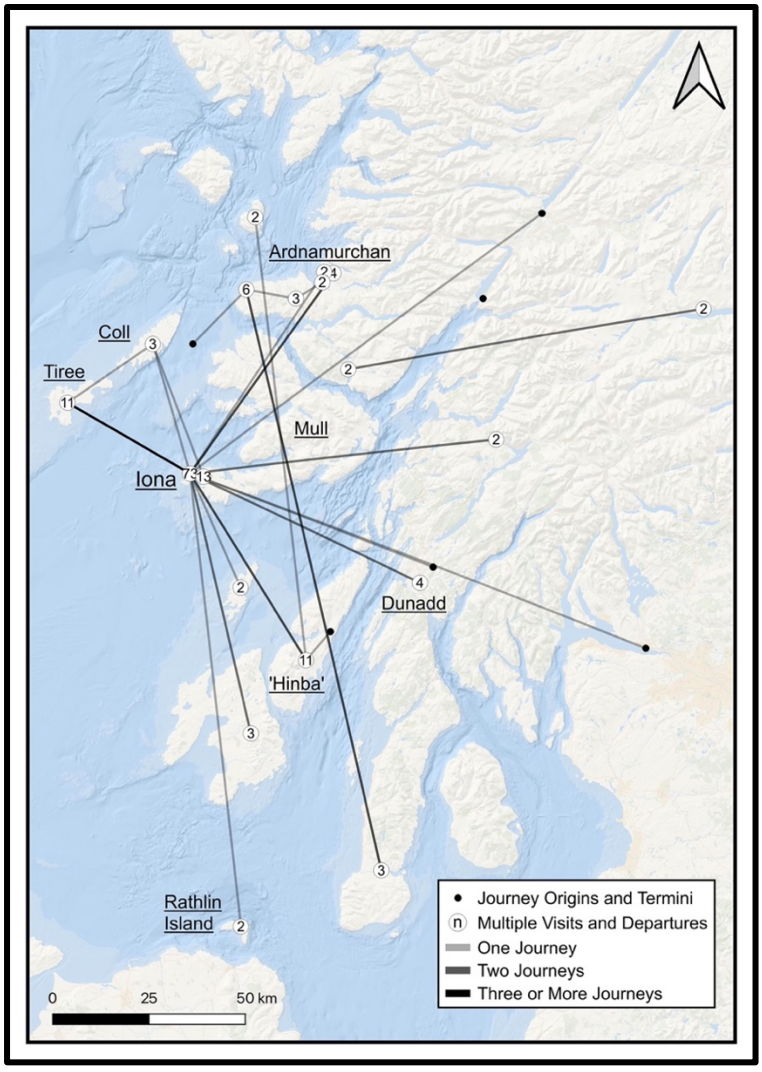
[51] The extent of the Ionan social network, and the capability of their vessels, may even be shown in technological adoption of their boats in eastern Scotland and Northumbria: Katrin Thier, 'The Cobles: Celtic Boats in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria?', *The Mariner's Mirror*, 86:2 (2000), pp. 131-7; *id*., 'Language and Technology: Some Examples from Seafaring (Germanic and Celtic)', *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 109 (2011), pp. 192-6.

[52] *AU*, §691.5; Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, p. 6.

[53] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 2, 111-18. It is possible that the kingdom extended as far north as Skye: Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1973), pp. 154-5; Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 203-6; James Fraser, 'The Iona Chronicle, the Descendants of Áedan mac Gabráin, and the "Principal Kindreds of Dál Riata"', *Northern Studies*, 38 (2004), pp. 84-6.

[54] *Míniugud Senchasa Fher nAlban*, §§37, 44, 50-2. For discussions of the dating and authenticity of this text see: Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 154-6; Dumville, 'Ireland and North Britain', pp. 52-5; *cf.* Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 353; Sharpe, 'The thriving of Dalriada', pp. 55-61.

The actual boundaries of the kingdom in the early medieval period are uncertain and certainly shifted throughout the period of this study.[55] Below is an updated map zooming in on Dál Riata and plotting the journeys found in the *Life of Columba* that took place in their territories. The centrality of the island of Iona is not surprising, yet even more essential is the close connectivity this map shows between Iona and the neighbouring Isles of Mull, Tiree and Coll.




*Map 4. Journeys from the* Life of Columba *in Dál Riata*.

Despite the small gap between Iona and Mull, the Sound was the most important geographic feature that impacted the medieval monastery. Stories

[55] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 7-8, 105-7.

frequently feature visitors shouting across the Sound to be picked up by Iona's boatmen.[56] John Bannerman chose not to include the journey between Mull and Iona in his list of ocean voyages in the *Life of Columba* owing to the short distance between the islands.[57] As mentioned in the last chapter, storms and the climate of western Scotland had the potential to isolate the island and prevent even these short journeys between Iona and Mull.[58] If one considers that to cross the Sound you needed both the wind and the tide in your favour, even such a small journey becomes complicated.[59] The Sound of Iona features tidal rips of around two-and-a-half knots, not to mention the many hazards and shoal beds that dominate this small gap of ocean.[60] For reference, the speed of these rips equals the average performance of Severin's *Brendan* boat of between two and three knots (including its extra mast) which has been suggested as the maximum speed of all pre-Viking craft.[61] To make even this short crossing, you would need the same favourable conditions and skills of seamanship to make a journey anywhere else in the Hebrides. Yet journeys between Iona and Mull were not only limited to ferrying visitors to the island monastery. In one story, the monks of Iona collected withies from a local man for the construction of a guesthouse.[62] Unlike the longer journeys to gather timber from around the River Shiel,[63] withies were a more common, a more local, and a more important everyday building material.[64] Iona's early medieval monks seem to have

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[56] *VC*, §§i.26-7, i.32, i.43.
[57] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 149-50, see n. 2.
[58] *VC*, §§i.4, iii.23; see also above Chapter One, pp. 63-65.
[59] See above, p. 93.
[60] UK Hydrographic Office, *South-West Coast of Scotland Pilot*, pp. 208, 210-11 (§§5.329, 5.340).
[61] McGrail, 'Cross-Channel Seamanship and Navigation', p. 300; Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, pp. 18-19; Severin, *The Brendan Voyage*, pp. 288-91.
[62] *VC*, §ii.3; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 214.
[63] *Cf.* n. 103 below.
[64] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 213. See Reeves, *The Life of St Columba*, p. 106, n. a (note to §ii.3), for other references to withies being used in monastic and church construction, one example being Bede, *HE*, §iii.25.

also sourced some of the stone used in their cross-incised slabs and free-standing crosses from quarries on Mull.[65] Sea-lanes appear in these stories as the monastery's main infrastructure to use its estates, to interact with nearby farms, and to maintain relationships with the local people who ran them. This had crucial consequences for the monastery's sustainability as discussed above.[66]

The story of the seal-thief Erc moccu Druidi is another example, linking Iona's sustainability concerns to local ocean movement between the monastery and its closest island neighbours.[67] Erc made a journey from Coll to Mull to hide near the seal rookery, waiting until nightfall before sneaking over to steal its calves. This prompted a series of journeys made by Erc and the monks of Iona that built up the connectivity between Iona, Mull, Tiree, and Coll that can be seen on the map. All within one chapter, these journeys create a series of dense links between this quartet of locations all within a day's sail of one another: an ultra-local archipelago within the larger archipelagos of Dál Riata and the 'North Atlantic Archipelago' (*i.e.* the British Isles).[68] The second most important connection in this ultra-local archipelago was between Iona and Tiree. The monastery of Mag Luinge, arguably the most important daughter monastery of the Columban *familia* during Columba's lifetime, was the reason why this connection was so strong and appears so on the map.[69] Headed at one time by Columba's successor Baithéne, journeys between Iona and

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[65] Ewan Campbell, 'A Cross-Marked Quern from Dunadd and Other Evidence for Relations Between Dunadd and Iona', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 117 (1987), pp. 108-9; RCAHMS, *Argyll*, Iona, pp. 180, 192, 201. The later Augustinian nunnery on Iona sourced most of its sandstone from Carsaig on Mull, a source potentially used in the early medieval period: Luis Albornoz-Parra, Emily Tracey, and Michael Burgoyne, 'A Building Stone Assessment of Sandstone in Iona Nunnery and at Carsaig Quarry on Mull', *British Geological Survey Commissioned Report*, CR/15/002 (Keyworth, 2015), pp. 16-19; RCAHMS, *Argyll*, Iona, p. 153; RCAHMS, *Argyll*, Mull, Tiree, Coll, and Northern Argyll, p. 159.
[66] See above Chapter One, pp. 70-83.
[67] *VC*, §i.41.
[68] J.G.A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge, 2005).
[69] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 21.

Tiree sometimes occurred twice in one day.[70] As I have suggested above, the fertile soil of Tiree may have meant this monastic outpost played a crucial role in supplementing the agricultural productivity of Iona.[71]

The frequency of ocean travel between these islands did not come without risk, and the dangers of ocean movement could equal the connectivity it engendered. In one significant story, when the monk Berach journeyed to Tiree, these dangers emerge. The monk was told by St Columba not to travel directly across the open ocean to Tiree but instead to sail north along the coasts of the Treshnish Isles and make the shorter crossing to Coll.[72] Part of Columba's warning was that if Berach disobeyed the saint a sea monster would appear and terrify the monk. Berach ignored the advice, and as predicted he was confronted by a sea-monster rising out of the ocean. Taking the route around the Treshnish Isles would have been a roundabout way to reach Tiree. Given the frequent interactions between the monasteries, it can be assumed that the open ocean route was favoured by the Ionan monks.[73] In another chapter of the *Life*, Baithéne crossed the same gap in about half a day with an easterly wind 'under full sail'.[74] However, there may have also been some advantage to taking the longer route northwards. Off the west coast of Iona along in this direct route to Tiree there are a stretch of overfalls that would have been a danger to any boats making that crossing.[75] Furthermore, the west coast of Iona features many promontories and hidden rocks. These could spell disaster for any sailor making this open-ocean voyage if the winds turned back to their dominant westerly direction, or

[70] *VC*, §i.19.
[71] See above, Chapter One, p. 73.
[72] *VC*, §i.19.
[73] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 107.
[74] *Ibid*.; *VC*, §ii.15.
[75] UK Hydrographic Office, *South-West Coast of Scotland Pilot*, pp. 208-09 (§§5.330.3-4).

rough waters forced the boat onto the shore.[76] I suggest in these circumstances that the whale in this episode may have been a symbol for the real hydrographical dangers that conditions could create in this patch of sea. That a young monk disobeyed his superior's advice might also hint that this was originally an instructive folk-story told by the elder monks to the young and impetuous. On the same day when Berach attempted to cross this stretch of sea, Columba's successor Baithéne did the same. Unlike Berach however, Baithéne trusted in the power of God over both him and the sea monster, and Columba permitted his successor to set sail and calm the beast, whether corporeal or environmental. Jacqueline Borsje has argued that this episode was a means of Adomnán demonstrating the proper hierarchy of monastic obedience: a monk should obey his abbot; but above all, a monk should obey the will of God; he obeyed neither at his peril.[77]

The attention Adomnán paid to the real risks of ocean travel can also be seen in the hazards present when traveling between Dál Riata's Irish territories on the coast of County Antrim and Iona. The key staging post that linked the Irish territories of Dál Riata to their Scottish lands seems to have been Rathlin Island, just off the coast of Co. Antrim.[78] The *Life* recounted that St Columba stayed on Rathlin Island as a guest, where he encountered a man called Luigne 'the little hammer' who worked as a 'steersman'.[79] Even this first leg of the voyage between Ireland and Iona had many hazards that necessitated a skilled sailor like Luigne. The sea just around Rathlin is dotted with many strong tidal streams, eddies, overfalls, and other

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[76] UK Hydrographic Office, *South-West Coast of Scotland Pilot*, p. 208 (§5.329.4); Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani*, §i.23.
[77] Jacqueline Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy: Encounters with Monsters in Early Irish Texts* (Turnhout, 1996), pp. 168-69.
[78] Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, n. 187; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 71; *VC*, §i.5.
[79] *VC*, §ii.41: *De quodam Lugneo guberneta, cognomento Tudicla*. Richard Sharpe suggests he may have been trader, moving goods between Ireland and Scotland: *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 320

hazards.[80] When setting out on a journey to Iona from Rathlin, the bishop Colmán moccu Sailni was trapped in the 'whirlpool of Breccán', in Irish *Coire Breccáin*: 'Breccán's Cauldron'.[81] Known popularly as the Whirlpool of Corryvreckan, today it is associated with severe tidal overfalls in the straits between Jura and Scarba.[82] Like Adomnán, the *c*.AD 900 *Glossary of Cormac* located the Whirlpool of Corryvreckan to the area of ocean 'between Ireland and Scotland to the north, in the meeting of the various seas'.[83] Here Breccán mac Máine mac Néill, a trader between Scotland and Ireland, with 'fifty currachs' was captured in the pull of the whirlpool and drowned: only the skull of his dog was recovered.[84] The dangers of this area may have been so hazardous that they isolated Iona and the north of Dál Riata from a good deal of trade voyages from farther afield.[85] The bishop Colmán, terrified, 'sitting in the prow, raised both his hands to heaven, and blessed the turbulent and terrible sea'.[86] Columba went on to explain that God terrified the bishop with this whirlpool not to drown him, but to rouse him to more vigorous prayer.[87] In this case, Colmán's dangerous confrontation with the whirlpool may have reflected some of the religious

[80] United Kingdom Hydrographic Office, *Admiralty Sailing Directions: Irish Coast Pilot [NP40]*, 22nd edn (Taunton, 2023), pp. 386-7, 389 (§§13.117, 13.120, 13.127); United States Naval Oceanographic Office, *Sailing Directions for Ireland*, 5th edn (Washington DC, 1962), pp. 257-8.
[81] *VC*, §i.5: *incipiens nunc in undosis carubdis Brecani aestibus valde periclitatur*.
[82] UK Hydrographic Office, *South-West Coast of Scotland Pilot*, pp. 147-8, (§§4.181-4.189). George Orwell almost drowned in this Whirlpool midway through writing *1984*: BBC Scotland, '"Gateway to Hell" – The Treacherous Strait of Water that Nearly Killed Literary Legend George Orwell' (20 Nov. 2017), https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5zJCqwY0GY2nt7LYsPnTNG2/gateway-to-hell-the-treacherous-strait-of-water-that-nearly-killed-literary-legend-george-orwell (30 Apr. 2025). It is also a major plot point in the film *I Know Where I'm Going!*: dir. Michael Powel and Emeric Pressburger (Film, 1945).
[83] *Sanas Chormaic: Cormac's Glossary*, ed. Whitley Stokes, trans. John O'Donovan (Calcutta, 1868), p. 41.
[84] *Sanas Chormaic*, pp. 41-2.
[85] See below, pp. 127-8.
[86] *VC*, §i.5: *ambasque ad caelum in prora sedens palmas elevat, turbatum quoque et tam formidabile pilagus benedicit*.
[87] *VC*, §i.5: *potius ad orandum intentius*.

attitudes Iona's monks had towards the ocean, while simultaneously being connected to the real ocean dangers that linked them to Ireland.[88]

The patterns of ocean movement seen in the *Life of Columba* could also be encoded with the socio-political relationships the monastery had with the kindreds of Dál Riata. Dál Riata was made up of three main kin groups that controlled their own collection of isles and territories in Scotland, covering what was largely coterminous with the old counties of Argyll and Bute: the Cenél nOengussa, the Cenél nGabráin, and the Cenél Loairn. This was the portrait recorded in the *Míniugud Senchasa Fher nAlban* for the mid-seventh century, and was certainly a simplification of the politics on the ground.[89] The Cenél nOengussa received the least amount of attention in the primary sources, but occupied Islay.[90] The dominant kindred in this triumvirate was the Cenél nGabráin, who seem to have controlled Kintyre, Arran, Jura, and pieces of the mainland along the west coast of the Firth of Clyde.[91] This kin-group also tended to monopolise the kingship of Dál Riata and controlled the important fort at Dunadd for most of Iona's early history.[92] King Conall of the Dál Riata, who may have granted Iona to Columba, was part of this family; this was the start of a close and

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[88] See also the discussion below, Chapter Three, pp. 191-4.
[89] Certainly, it excluded the potentially important role played by the Cenél Comgaill covered in a later text, the *Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Riata*, among others: *Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Riata*, §§H/F/B/L.6, 46-58; David Dumville, 'Political Organization in Dál Riata', in Fiona Edmonds and Paul Russell (eds.), *Tome: Studies in Medieval Celtic History and Law in Honour of Thomas Charles-Edwards* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 41-52; James Fraser, '*Dux Reuda* and Corcu Réti', in Wilson McLeod *et al*. (eds.), *Cànan & Cultar / Language and Culture: Rannschadh na Gàidhlig 3* (Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 1-9; *id*., 'The Iona Chronicle and the "Principal Kindreds of Dál Riata"', 77-96; *id*., 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn, 678-733', in Wilson McLeod *et al.* (eds.), *Bile ós Chrannaibh: A festschrift for William Gillies* (Tigh a'Mhaide, 2010), pp. 135-59; *Míniugud Senchasa Fher nAlban*, §38; *cf.* Sharpe, 'The Thriving of Dalriada', pp. 55-61.
[90] Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 159-60; *Míniugud Senchasa Fher nAlban*, §21-35.
[91] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 111-12; Sharpe, 'The Thriving of Dalriada', pp. 55-61. *cf.* Fraser, '*Dux Reuda* and Corcu Réti', pp. 1-9; *id*., *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 165, 251; *id*., 'The Iona Chronicle and the "Principal Kindreds of Dál Riata"', pp. 77-96.
[92] This point is argued most fervently by Sharpe: 'The Thriving of Dalriada', pp. 47-61; *cf*. Dumville, 'Political Organization in Dál Riata', pp. 41-52. On Dunadd being the capital of the Cenél nGabráin and/or Dál Riata as a whole, see Alan Lane and Ewan Campbell, *Dunadd: An Early Dalriadic Capital* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 37-40; Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 112-13; Dumville, 'Political Organization in Dál Riata', n. 21; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 136; *id*., 'The Thriving of Dalriada', pp. 50-2; Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, p. 107.

long-standing relationship between the community and this kindred.[93] Despite this, the Cenél Loairn feature most prominently in the *Life of Columba*, and it was in their territories that most of the Dál Riata journeys seen on the map took place. Best put by Alfred P. Smyth: 'Columba was from first to last a saint not even of the ruling Cenél Gabhráin territory but of the Cenél Loairn […], expeditions outside [their territory] seem to have been exceptional rather than the rule'.[94] This kin group lived along the mainland north from Dunadd to the beginning of the Great Glen, and across the Ardnamurchan peninsula, as well as on the isles of Colonsay, Mull, Tiree and Coll.[95]

The obvious reason most of the Dál Riata journeys took place in the lands of the Cenél Loairn was because the ultra-local archipelago of Iona's immediate geography sat within their territory.[96] The most significant journeys that took place in the lands of the Cenél Loairn, outside of the immediate vicinity of Iona, were those made by St Columba and his monks to the people living on the Ardnamurchan peninsula. These Ardnamurchan journeys were often connected to the miracles of agricultural productivity described in the previous chapter, but also the miracles that revealed Iona and Columba's control over the Dál Riata sealanes.[97] On the River Shiel, a miracle of Columba brought a great catch of salmon to the fisherman of the Cenél Loairn.[98] One farmer, Colmán, was visited on two occasions by Columba. In return for the generous hospitality shown to the saint, Columba blessed his herd of cattle and it multiplied over twenty-fold.[99] In a following chapter, Colmán was

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[93] *AT*, §573.1; *AU*, §574.2; *cf.* n. 90 above, and below, Chapter Four, p. 229.
[94] Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, p. 103.
[95] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 112-14; *cf.* Fraser, 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', pp. 146-53.
[96] *Cf.* Fraser, 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', pp. 146-53.
[97] See also above, Chapter One, p. 83.
[98] *VC*, §ii.19.
[99] *VC*, §ii.21.

raided by Ioan mac Conaill of the Cenél nGabráin by boat three times: likely journeying northwards from Kintyre.[100] During the third raid however, the saint arrived unexpectedly and scolded the Cenél nGabráin raiders as they were loading their spoils onto their boats. They set sail and by the saint's command a sudden storm picked up, drowning these sailors between Mull and Coll. All at once, this story shows the use of the seaways in Dál Riata, the political tensions between its kindreds, as well as the risks that dominated this archipelago. It is almost certain that the squall that drowned Ioan and his men would have been a common risk to sailors. St Columba's control of the weather to protect the territories of the Cenél Loairn from ocean raiders, extended to beneficial miracles to help sailors in the area as well. Adomnán stressed that it was when he was 'among the people of the Cenél Loairn' that St Columba's blessing granted him helpful winds. These allowed the abbot to make it back to Iona in time to celebrate Columba's feast day.[101] This is the same chapter where winds on the River Shiel, again in the territories of the Cenél Loairn, helped Adomnán and his monks return to Iona quickly and without any effort when collecting timber.[102]

These journeys reflected a close relationship between Iona and the Cénel Loairn in terms of hospitality, exchange of material, and spiritual patronage. I would argue that the closeness between the monastery and this clan extended beyond simple geographical proximity, supporting my suggestion that the sustainability needs of Iona were met primarily by the local farmers of the Cenél Loairn.[103] These

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[100] *VC*, §i.22.
[101] *VC*, §ii.45: *in plebe generis Loerni*; *cf.* T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 138-40.
[102] *VC*, §ii.45. By locating this story on the River Shiel I am following Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, n. 202; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 340; and Watson, *Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, pp. 76-7. *Cf.* Fraser, 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', n. 65; Reeves, *The Life of St Columba*, p. 177, n. c (note to §ii.45); William Skene (ed.), *The Life of St Columba, Founder of Hy* (Edinburgh, 1874), pp. 326-7.
[103] See above Chapter One, pp. 75-83.

same episodes have primarily however attracted political explanations: they instead reflect Iona and Adomnán courting the support of the Cenél Loairn in response to a changing balance of power within Dál Riata.[104] From Iona's foundation in the sixth century until the late seventh, the kingship of Dál Riata seems to have been monopolised by the Cenél nGabráin.[105] Ferchar 'the Tall' of the Cenél Loairn appears in the *Iona Chronicle* in AD 678, when many of his kin died in a battle with the Britons.[106] He may have been the first king of the Dál Riata from the Cenél Loairn, but at a minimum he is the first significant figure from the kindred to appear in the annals. He seems to have grown the power of his kindred so that his sons and grandsons consistently competed for the over-kingship of Dál Riata during the abbacy of Adomnán.[107] The frequent mention of this kindred in the *Iona Chronicle* after AD 678 may have reflected its rise to political supremacy.[108]

To be more precise about these kings: Ferchar 'the Tall' (*r*. AD 676? – 697?); his sons Ainfchellach (*r*. AD 697 – 698) and Selbach (*r*. AD 700 – 723); and his grandsons Dúngal (*r*. AD 723 – 726?) and Muiredach (*r*. AD 733 – 736?) all came from the Cenél nEchdach branch of the Cenél Loairn. Their territory probably spanned the Morvern peninsula, Upper Lorn, and crucially, it may have also included

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[104] Márkus, 'Iona: Monks, Pastors, Missionaries', p. 118.
[105] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 96-100, 97 n. 1, 99 n. 7, 104; Dumville, '*Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Riata*', pp. 189-90; Sharpe, 'The Thriving of Dalriada', pp. 51, 59. *Cf*. Fraser, 'The Iona Chronicle and the "Principal Kindreds of Dál Riata"', pp. 90-4; Anderson, *Kings and Kingship*, p. 150, n.138.
[106] *AT*, §678.4; *AU*, §678.3.
[107] Later medieval king-lists are the only evidence for his kingship, and they claim he ruled for twenty-one years; he does not fit nicely into those lists, but he may have been a joint king of the Dál Riata for some of that reign: Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland*, pp. 111-12, 179; Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, §678.3, n. 5; *Cronica Regum Scottorum. CCC. et IIIJ. Annorum*, ed. William Skene, *Chronicles of the Picts, Chronicles of the Scots, and Other Early Memorials of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1867), p. 130; Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 249. It may also be that centralised kingship of Dál Riata at this time is an illusion of the sources, instead chaos and infighting may have been the norm: A.A.M. Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh, 1975), pp. 44-5.
[108] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 109-10.

Ardnamurchan.[109] Even more precisely, they all may have been from a particular segment of that kindred, the Cenél Baítáin.[110] Colmán, the farmer whose cattle Columba blessed, and whom the saint defended against Cenél nGabráin raiders, had the same name as one of the sons of Baítán. He was possibly a direct ancestor of the Cenél nEchdach kings.[111] In this case, Columba's miracles of agricultural bounty in Dál Riata were not only directly benefitting the Cenél Loairn, but also were connected to the particular familial branch of that kindred who were gaining in power at the end of the seventh century, and contested the kingship at the turn of the eighth. In an episode that followed the raid on Colmán, Columba excommunicated the raiding band of the Cenél nGabráin, and one of them, Lám Dess, threw a spear at the saint.[112] The saint was miraculously saved but prophesied that Lám Dess would be killed during a battle on 'Long Island' by one Crónán mac Báetáin, another potential ancestor of the Cenél Baítáin kings mentioned above.[113] The Cenél nEchdach were not only under the protection of Columba but were also the agents of his retribution. This spiritual patronage towards the Cenél Loairn was not only at the expense of the Cenél nGabráin, but it may have also extended to backing the Cenél nEchdach kindred in struggles within the Cenél Loairn. James Fraser has suggested that Adomnán portrayed the isle of Mull as a 'bad island', '*Mal*[e]*a insula*', a 'land fit for worldly sinners and the source of threats to Iona's property and rights' because its inhabitants were the Cenél Cathbad, local rivals to the Cenél nEchdach.[114] Late in

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[109] On these reigns see Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland*, pp. 179-88, 228; Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 242-6, 250-2, 273-4, 282-5, 293-302; *id*., 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', pp. 146-53.
[110] One cannot be sure as to where they resided, but Fraser has suggested a powerbase on the northern shore of Loch Linnhe across from Mull, but evidence also points to the north of Ardnamurchan: 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', pp. 146-53.
[111] *Cethrí Prímchenéla Dáil Riata*, §H/F.29; Fraser, 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', n.50; *VC*, §ii.22.
[112] *VC*, §ii.24.
[113] Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, p. xxxii; Fraser, 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', pp. 149-53.
[114] Fraser, 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', pp. 148-9, 158-9; *VC*, §§i.22, i.41, ii.22.

the abbacy of Adomnán, the Cenél Cathbad joined forces with the Cenél nGabráin to remove Ainfchellach of the Cenél nEchdach from the kingship of Dál Riata and took over the royal seat at Dunollie.[115] When Selbach took up his kingship three years later in AD 701, he recaptured Dunollie and 'slaughtered the Cenél Cathbad'.[116]

I am less convinced that Mull was treated by Adomnán as a bad island. I think Fraser came to this conclusion because he ignored the implicit mentions of Mull in stories related to visitors who shouted across the Sound: while some of these visitors were bad guests, more often annoying, not all were.[117] There was also the miracle of Columba where he relied on the local community, probably of Mull, for building materials, and gave them barley that grew miraculously in return.[118] If these were members of the Cenél Cathbad, then like the Cenél nEchdach, they were crucial farmers that the community of Iona relied upon to overcome potential challenges to their monastery's sustainability. Moreover, Iona's abbots seem to have controlled a church on the River Awe, potentially in Cenél Cathbad territory, which may have then played a pastoral role for this kin group.[119] This church was part of a larger social network that Adomnán and Iona clearly maintained among the Cenél Loairn. When Adomnán travelled back from a synod in Ireland, he may have stayed as a guest among the Cenél Fergusso Salaich, another branch of the Cenél Loairn.[120]

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[115] *AU*, §698.3-4.
[116] *AU*, §701.8-9: *Iugulatio Generis Cathboth*. Bannerman saw this as Selbach putting down a rebellion. I think it is more likely that Selbach was both getting revenge and recapturing the royal seat of the Cenél Loairn: *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 110, 112; *cf*. Fraser, 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', pp. 158-9.

On the excavations at Dunollie and how Selbach may have reinforced this minimally defensible site: Leslie Alcock and Elizabeth A. Alcock, 'Reconnaissance Excavations on Early Historic Fortifications and Other Royal Sites in Scotland, 1974–84: 2, Excavations at Dunollie Castle, Oban, Argyll, 1978', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 117 (1987), pp. 121-6, 127-8.
[117] *VC*, §§i.22, i.25-7.
[118] *VC*, §ii.3; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n.214.
[119] Márkus, 'Iona: Monks, Pastors, Missionaries', p. 132; Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Annat in Scotland and the Origins of the Parish', *Innes Review*, 46:2 (1995), pp. 112-15; *VC*, §i.31. There is, however, very little evidence for the precise territory controlled by the Cenél Cathbad: *cf*. Fraser, 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', pp. 157-9.
[120] *VC*, §ii.45; *cf.* Fraser, 'Three Thirds of Cenél Loairn', pp. 155-7.

This non-partisan social network, revealed in the ocean-journeys present in the *Life*, extended to the other *Prímchenéla*, 'principle kindreds', of Dál Riata. St Cainnech, sailing from the Iona back to Ireland, had left his staff behind. Columba miraculously transported the staff to Islay, where Cainnech had stopped to pray: he may have been staying at the Ionan estates and churches on that island controlled by the Cenél nOengussa.[121] Most significantly, even though Adomnán devoted a number of episodes to the evils of Cenél nGabráin raiders, Columba famously ordained Áedán mac Gabráin as king,[122] prayed for his success in battle,[123] and it was probably from this kin-group that Columba received Iona.[124] The Dál Riata ocean journeys captured in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* reveal the latitude of the monastery's immediate social hinterland.[125] Iona's monks and abbots should not be seen as political partisans to one particular kindred, or even a branch within a kindred; instead they were a community that straddled these divides.

Iona's abbots could however be political animals. As is seen in the next section of this chapter, Adomnán certainly was. Adomnán's *Life* was also political: it claimed that Columba ordained Áedán mac Gabráin as king; that God ordained Diarmait mac Cerbaill as king over all of Ireland; and that the spirit of Columba helped Oswald achieve victory against Cadwallon so that he too would be ordained

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[121] Catherine Swift, 'Irish Influence on Ecclesiastical Settlements in Scotland: A Case Study of the Island of Islay' (MPhil Thesis, University of Durham, 1987), pp. 324-6; *VC*. §ii.14. *Cf*. *VC*, §ii.23.
[122] *VC*, §iii.5. On the potential significance his anointing, see the work of Michael J. Enright: *Iona, Tara and Soissons: The Origin of the Royal Anointing Ritual* (Berlin, 1985), pp. 5-24; *id*., *Prophecy and Kingship in Adomnán's 'Life of Saint Columba'* (Dublin, 2013), pp. 58-61, 78-84; *id*. 'Royal Succession and Abbatial Prerogative in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', *Peritia*, 4 (1985), pp. 83-103. *Cf*. James Fraser, 'St Columba and the Convention at Druimm Cete: Peace and Politics at Seventh-Century Iona', *Early Medieval Europe*, 15:3 (2007), pp. 332-3; Michael Meckler, 'Colum Cille's Ordination of Áedán mac Gabráin', *Innes Review*, 41:2 (1990), pp. 139-47; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'A Contract Between King and People in Early Medieval Ireland? *Críth Gablach* on Kingship', *Peritia*, 8 (1994), pp. 107-19.
[123] *VC*, §i.8.
[124] *AU*, §574.2; *VC*, §i.7. *Cf*. above, pp. 101-2 nn. 89-93, and see the Introduction, pp. 7-10.
[125] In this vision Adomnán was comfortable dealing with both kings and over-kings: *cf*. Enright, *Prophecy and Kingship*, pp. 183-4.

by God as emperor over all of Britain.[126] All these stories point to a particular vision of insular Christian kingship held by Adomnán, and he claimed a substantial role for Iona's abbots in its regime.[127] Political power was inseparable from spiritual power, and Iona's abbots saw a mediating role for themselves in its practice; but following on from the conclusions of the first chapter, I would point out that both political and spiritual power were also inseparable from environmental concerns.[128] As has been said, the stories and journeys in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* have been associated with a political shift in Ionan interest from the Cenél nGabráin to the Cenél Loairn. This is fundamentally a correlational argument connecting Adomnán's abbacy and his writing to the ascendancy of the Cenél Loairn. The *Life*, and the varied treatment it offers for different Dálriatan kindreds, does not support this assessment. I would argue instead that the *Life* contained a diversity of 'political' arguments for the spiritual power of Columba and Iona. These included a claim for the saint's patronage towards Dálriatan kingship presented to the Cenél nGabráin. At the same time, the *Life* contained a claim for Iona's ecological patronage towards the territories of the Cenél Loairn. Both these arguments were 'political': they supported Iona's claim to paramount spiritual authority within the kingdom. Again, the range and density of ocean links between Iona's monks and the kindreds of Dál Riata in the *Life of Columba* shows the Ionan ability to straddle political divides. This paralleled the community's political capacity to offer varied forms of spiritual patronage.

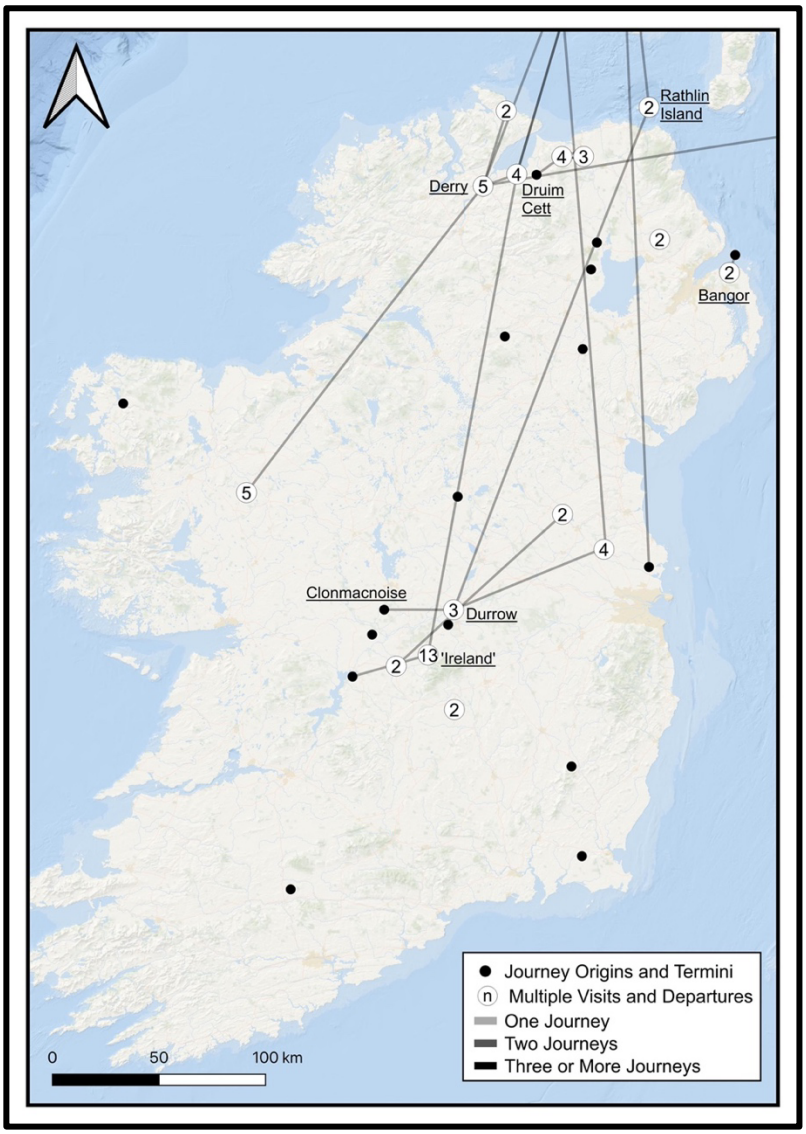
[126] *VC*, §i.1, i.36, iii.5.
[127] Enright, *Prophecy and Kingship*, pp. 9-10, 78-84.
[128] See above, Chapter One, pp. 82-3.

Insular Seaways

In the *Life of Columba* more journeys were described as having taken place in the wider insular world than within Dál Riata.[129] However, many of the local journeys around Dál Riata represented common occurrences, and thus one recorded journey could act as a proxy for many over the course of any theoretical year. Two trips to Tiree could be made on the same day, whereas a journey of an Ionan abbot to Ireland was a major occurrence worthy of note, and might take them away from the Hebridean island for years.[130] These insular journeys can be broken down into some regional categories for some further thought: those to the northern coasts of Ireland (roughly between the Inishowen peninsula and Belfast Lough); those around the Irish midlands;[131] those journeys to Pictland; and finally, those to Northumbria.

Taken together, Irish destinations and departure points are mentioned the second most out of all journey locations in the *Life*, behind only Iona.[132] This is to be expected: Columba and many of his monks were Irishmen.[133] As discussed already, the geography of Scotland also meant that the monks of Iona were closer to Ireland than to the Picts who lived across the 'Spine of Britain'.[134] Yet Iona was, and has been described as, 'Janus-like': simultaneously looking backwards to Ireland and forwards to Britain (or the other way around depending on your historiographical persuasion).[135] While journeys to Pictland or Northumbria were not as numerous as

[129] Sixty-eight of the journeys were made in Ireland, Pictland, Northumbria, or between insular kingdoms compared to fifty-three journeys within Dál Riata.
[130] *AT*, §660.4; *AU*, §§673.4, 676.5, 692.1, 697.3, 727.5, 730.3; *VC*, §i.19.
[131] It should be noted that since I placed the generic 'Ireland' node in the middle of the country, the visual impact of the map is slightly skewed.
[132] There are sixty-nine mentions of Irish locations in total compared to Iona's seventy-three.
[133] When Adomnán mentions monks of Brittonic origin, it seems to be an exception, but note their significance: Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 306-8; *VC*, §§iii.6, iii.19.
[134] See above, Chapter One, p. 32.
[135] Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge, 2013), p. 60.




*Map 5. Journeys from the* Life of Columba *in Ireland.*

those to and within Ireland, they were incredibly significant. As is shown below, the disparity between the significance of these locations, and their scarce appearance in the journeys, can partially be explained by the interest or disinterest of Adomnán.

One of the first chapters in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* featured the young St Fintan meeting some monks who had arrived from Derry.[136] These monks had just sailed over from Iona. Fintan and his kindred, the moccu Moie, seem to have lived

[136] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 53; *VC*, §i.2.

within a day's journey of Derry, probably along the coast.[137] The moccu Moie are mentioned in connection to another ocean journey made in the *Life*, when Ionan sailors were welcomed at the shoreline by Lasrén, a future Ionan monk and gardener, who ran to catch the prow of the boat.[138] For the moccu Moie to feature so prominently in the *Life*, one might speculate that future monks of Iona continued to be sourced from this kindred, or that they often offered hospitality to Ionan sailors after long journeys. The estuary of Lough Foyle seems to have been a key staging post in the communication network of Iona. The monk Trénán, who landed with these sailors among the moccu Moie, was sent as a messenger by Columba, who expected him to travel in Ireland for at least several days after his arrival. Another story featured a man traveling to Derry expecting to find a ship there that might take him to Britain.[139] Derry was claimed in the later medieval period to be Columba's first foundation.[140] In reality it probably was founded by the patronage of Columba's royal cousin Áed mac Ainmirech some years after Iona.[141] It was well-placed in the territory of the Northern Uí Néill to welcome sailors from Iona and maintain the connections that many Ionan abbots had with their royal kin.[142] These examples of voyaging stand out among the journeys in Ireland because, at least impressionistically, they seem to reveal the well-travelled routeways taken by Iona's monks where most other insular journeys in this collection lack the same degree of detail.

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[137] William Reeves suggests the church of Enagh, next to the Loch on the shores of the River Foyle: *The Life of St Columba*, p. 19, n. d (note to §i.2).
[138] *VC*, §i.18.
[139] *VC*, §ii.39.
[140] *Betha Coluim Cille*, ed. and trans. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, §32.
[141] All direct connections to Áed are late, but his nephew is described in the *Annals of Tigernach* as 'the other founder of Derry' (*AT*, §620.2). If Áed did donate the land, it would probably have been after he became king in the 580s, after Columba had established himself on Iona: Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 54.
[142] See above, Introduction, pp. 2-4.

Many journeys around the north of Ireland seem particularly related to Ulster politics and its connection to Dál Riata. One journey followed the monk Colgu mac Cellaig, sailing home for a visit.[143] St Columba had prophesied months earlier that, '"demons are carrying off to hell one tight-fisted chief from among the leading men of your district"'.[144] This evil chief may have been Gallán mac Fachtnai, king of the Dál nAraidi.[145] The Dál nAraidi, also called the *Cruithni*, were one of the dominant kindreds in the province of Ulster.[146] The negative feeling towards Gallán mac Fachtnai applied to other appearances of the Dál nAraidi in the *Life*. Áed Dub, a member of the Dál nAraidi sailed to Tiree to live as a priest in pilgrimage. He had killed the God 'ordained' king of all Ireland Diarmait mac Cerbaill, a member of the Uí Néill.[147] If he was given refuge by the Dál Riata, this possibly reveals an alliance between these two kin groups.[148] Áed Dub later returned to rule the province of Ulster as the leader of the Dál nAraidi, 'like a dog to his own vomit', and was later killed in battle.[149] In another journey in this cluster, when travelling with his friend St Comgall in the northeast of Ireland, St Columba prophesied that Comgall's kin, the Dál nAraidi, and his own Uí Néill family would go to war with one another, and that the nearby little spring would be filled with the blood of the Uí Néill.[150]

The last of the above journeys related to Ulster politics followed on from Columba's attendance of the conference of kings at Druim Cett. Probably taking

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[143] *VC*, §i.35.
[144] *VC*, §i.35: '*nunc unum tenacem primarium de tuae praepossitis diociseos daemones ad inferna rapiunt'*. On '*diociseos'*, see Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 154.
[145] Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, n. 75.
[146] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, p. 2; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 54-6. Alex Woolf has suggested that the Dál nAraidi, and the Dál Riata were originally one kindred, possibly of British origin: 'Ancient Kindred?', pp. 8-11.
[147] *AU*, §565.1; *VC*, §i.36. On the potential political ideology of Adomnán that this may reveal, see: Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, pp. 14-15; *id*., *Prophecy and Kingship*, pp. 24-39.
[148] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalraida*, pp. 3-4.
[149] *AU*, §588.4; *The Book of Leinster*, R.I. Best *et al*. (eds.) (6 vols, Dublin, 1954-1983), i, pp. 192-6; *VC*, §i.36. On his 'three-fold death', see Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, pp. 97-102.
[150] *VC*, §i.49.

place *c*.AD 590,[151] this conference between Áedán mac Gabráin of the Dál Riata, and Áed mac Ainmirech, Columba's Uí Néill cousin, seems to have forged an alliance between these kingdoms.[152] St Comgall's presence as a mediator may also suggest that the Dál nAraidi were involved in discussions.[153] Columba's unique place, being kin to the Uí Néill but abbot to an important Dálriatan monastery, made him the perfect diplomat in these negotiations.[154] Scholars have focused on the potential political motivations for the prominent inclusion of Druim Cett in Adomnán's *Life*. This may help explain why this cluster of journeys appeared in the northwest of Ireland. At the core of these arguments is the potential partisanship of the abbots towards their Uí Néill kin.[155] An Ionan scribe made an addition to a story in the *Life of Columba* from Cumméne the White's earlier collection of Columban miracles, *The Miracles of Saint Columba*, which is now lost.[156] After Columba ordained Áedán mac Gabráin as king of the Dál Riata he prophesied that if the king 'practises deceit against [Columba]', 'his successors [as abbot]', or his 'kindred who are in Ireland' they would lose the 'sceptre of kingship' and they would be placed 'in

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[151] The annal date (*AU*, §575.1) is probably too early, and is perhaps a late medieval addition: Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 204; Michael Meckler, 'The *Annals of Ulster* and the Date of the Meeting at Druim Cett', *Peritia*, 11 (1997), pp. 44-52; *cf*. Bart Jaski, 'Druim Cett Revisited', *Peritia*, 12 (1998), pp. 340-50.

[152] The preface to the *Amrae Coluimb Chille* gives three reasons for the Convention of Druim Cett i) the freeing of a prince of Ossory, ii) to prevent the Irish poets from being banished, and iii) to make peace between the Dál Riata and the Northern Uí Néill and define their relationship in regards to the Irish territories of Dál Riata: *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, 'The Bodleian *Amra Choluimb Chille*', *Revue Celtique,* 20 (1899), pp. 38-9, 420-6. Máire Herbert has convincingly shown that this preface is a later medieval product, but John Bannerman has held up the third reason as the primary goal of the convention while dismissing the first two: Máire Herbert, 'The Preface to *Amra Coluim Cille*', in Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Kim McCone (eds.), *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth, 1989), pp. 71-3; Bannerman *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 1-2, 157-62. It being a simple alliance seems the most plausible explanation in my mind: Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, pp. 110-11.

[153] Possibly at the expense of the Dál Fiatach, another Ulster kindred: Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, pp. 110-11; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 488, n. 80.

[154] This was a unique position that Iona's abbots exploited for their monastery: Miho Tanaka, 'Iona and the Kingship of Dál Riata in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', *Peritia*, 17-18 (2003-4), pp. 199-214.

[155] Enright, 'Royal Succession and Abbatial Prerogative', pp. 96-100; Fraser, 'St Columba and the Convention at Druimm Cete', pp. 332-3. Though if Adomnán was a 'propagandist [he is] astonishingly indirect': Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 494.

[156] On this text as a source for Adomnán, see Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 134-6.

subjection to outsiders'.[157] Cumméne's work went on to explain that the kings of Dál Riata brought this prophecy to fruition when they attacked the Uí Néill and sided with the Dál nAraidi at the battle of Mag Roth in AD 637, during the abbacy of Ségéne, Cumméne's uncle.[158] Ségéne and Cumméne clearly felt this alliance between the Uí Néill and the Dál Riata was important to their standing and influence, and wanted this to be known to the kings of Dál Riata. While clearly an important miracle in Cumméne's time, it may have lost its relevance when Adomnán set out to write his hagiography of Columba.[159] Overall however, it is probable that the negative depictions of the Dál nAraidi, the prominent place of the convention at Druim Cett in the *Life*, and the journeys linked to these contexts, originated in the body of miracles written by Cumméne[160]

The Irish midland journeys also show the routes of Iona's ocean connectivity and the potential socio-religious interests of Iona in Ireland. The *Life* revealed the route taken by Iona's monks to reach the Irish midlands was via boat, landing on the coasts of Brega between the river Delvin and the Liffey, not overland from Derry.[161] The Árd Ciannachta who lived in this area seem have had a parallel status to the moccu Moie by facilitating travel between Iona and Ireland.[162] The most notable journey in this cluster is Columba's visit to Clonmacnoise after he founded the monastery of Durrow.[163] It was on this occasion that Adomnán made his only

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[157] *VC*, §iii.5: *[…] donec prius fraudulentiam agas in me et in posteros meos […] ipsi filliis et nepotibus et posteris suis commendent, ne per consilia mala eorum sceptrum regni huius de manibus suis perdant […] aut adversus cognatos meos qui sunt in Hibernia […] Et a die illa usque hodie adhuc in procliuo sunt ab extraneis*.
[158] *AT*, §639.1; *AU*, §637.1; Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 5-8; *VC*, §iii.5
[159] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n.360.
[160] Fraser, 'St Columba and the Convention at Druimm Cete', pp. 332-4.
[161] *VC*, §§ii.4, ii.39.
[162] On the importance of this kin group see Michael Byrnes, 'The Árd Ciannachta in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*: A Reflection of Iona's Attitude to the Síl nÁeda Sláine in the Late Seventh Century', in Alfred P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in Early and Medieval Irish Archaeology, History and Literature in Honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 131-3.
[163] *VC*, §i.3.

mention of the Easter Controversy, something apparently crucial to the early medieval history of the Ionan *familia*, and yet he did not offer his own view, or Columba's:

> By the power of the holy spirit, it was those same days when the Saint was residing in Clonmacnoise that he prophesied many other things: that is, about the discord among the Irish churches which began after many days because of the disagreement over the Paschal Feast.[164]

This vagueness may be significant.[165] Clare Stancliffe and Máire Herbert have argued that the lack of partisanship on this issue shown by Columba was an attempt to maintain confraternity within the Ionan *familia*.[166] More than just 'charity and peace' within the Ionan *familia* however, Columba's journey to Clonmacnoise also pointed to Adomnán's aims in fostering cooperation and harmony between competing monastic communities. This seems to have been successful, as two abbots of Clonmacnoise, Faílbe Becc and Osséne mac Galluist,[167] both appeared as guarantors to Adomnán's *Law of Innocents* along with the abbot of Kildare, Forandán, the bishop of Armagh, Fland of Febail, and Muirchú, an Armagh hagiographer of St Patrick.[168] Both Kildare and Armagh had used their contrasting views on the dating of Easter to argue for their primacy over the entire Irish Church at the expense of each other, and Iona.[169]

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[164] *VC*, §i.3: *Sed et multa alia hisdem diebus quibus in Clonoensi cenubio sanctus hospitabatur revelante profetavit sancto spiritu: hoc est de illa quae post dies multos ob diversitatem paschalis festi orta est inter Scotiae eclesias discordia*.
[165] Gilbert Márkus has argued that this episode was Adomnán implicitly arguing for the Dionysian Easter: 'Adomnán, Two Saints, and the Paschal Controversy', *Innes Review*, 68:1 (2017), pp. 1-18. In contrast, David Woods, 'Adomnán, Plague, and the Easter Controversy', pp. 3-5, sees this episode as explicitly arguing the opposite.
[166] Clare Stancliffe, '"Charity with Peace": Adomnán and the Easter Question', in Wooding *et al*. (eds.), *Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, pp. 60-8; Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 48-50, 53-5. 146-8.
[167] The relationship between these two Clonmacnoise abbots may be more complicated, it may in fact change the way one reads the above miracle: Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Adomnán and the Abbacy of Clonmacnoise: Historical Needs, Literary Narratives', *Innes Review*, 57:2 (2006), pp. 207-13.
[168] Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Guarantor List of *Cáin Adomnáin*', pp. 185-6, 188, 196.
[169] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 416-40; Cogitosus, *Vita S. Brigitae*, trans. Sean Connolly and Jean-Michel Picard, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 117 (1987),

Both the diplomatic ideals of Adomnán and the political motives of Cumméne seem to influence the inclusion of these Irish journeys in the *Life*. More than this, Adomnán spent years in Ireland building the necessary relationships and support to achieve his *Law of Innocents*.[170] These journeys also give the reader some real sense of the major sea-lanes used by Adomnán and which connected the community of Iona to Ireland. The Lough Foyle estuary connected many of Iona's monks and abbots to their Uí Néill kin and to the north of Ireland. The Brega coast seems to have been the major landing place for monks travelling in the Irish midlands. In both cases, the stories connected to these routes are textured with enough detail that one can believe they reflected common ocean-ways used by the monks. When Lasrén the gardener ran to the shoreline of Lough Foyle to grab the prow of the boat, or when Librán convinced sailors at Derry to ferry him to Britain, these have the appearance of truth.[171] Likewise, when Columba gave specific directions to Silnán to bring healing bread to the area between the River Delvin and the Liffey, the familiarity shown with the geography and kin that lived there hints that this was a common destination for Ionan sailors.[172] This attention to detail stemmed from the centrality of Ireland in the social network of Iona; at least as it is presented by Adomnán in his *Life*. Turning to the other insular journeys, it becomes clear that the priorities of the author had a significant influence on which of Iona's social relationships were emphasised.

One gets the sense in the *Life of Columba* that connectivity between Iona and Pictland was sparse: there seems to be only a single journey made to Pictland by

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§pref.4; Immo Warntjes, 'Pope Vitalian's Letter to King Oswiu of Northumbria and the Beginning of Armagh's Claim to Primacy over the Irish Churches', *Revue Bénédictine*, 134 (2024), pp. 5-43; *Liber Angeli*, ed. and trans. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts*, §§21, 28-9; Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §§18.1-5, 22.4.
[170] *AU*, §§692.1, 697.3; *Cáin Adomnáin*, §33.
[171] *VC*, §§i.18, ii.39.
[172] *VC*, §ii.4

Columba and his entourage, compared to his numerous journeys in Ireland and the many more made by his monks.[173] Columba looks to have sailed to where Loch Linnhe meets the Great Glen.[174] There he travelled up-river, seemingly bringing boats with him. He and his monks seem to have then loch-hopped up to at least Loch Ness. On the banks of Loch Ness, the saint and his monks seem to have used local vessels.[175] The difficulty in reaching Pictland, a mixture of ocean, loch, and foot travel, supports Adomnán's perspective that the 'Spine of Britain' divided the peoples of Scotland, and continues the impression that, both geographically and culturally, Iona was far closer to Ireland than much of Scotland. There is only one example of an ocean voyage taken directly to Pictland, and that is the arrival of Cormac Ua Liatháin in Orkney.[176] Cormac probably travelled around the Western Isles or via the Minch: the channel between the Outer and Inner Hebrides. The Minch was both a 'tedious' and 'hazardous' route to cross the 'Spine of Britain' compared to the route through the Great Glen. This was certainly the reason Columba did not attempt to sail this way to the court of Bridei. It was also part of the impetus behind building the Caledonian canal.[177]

While Bede claimed that Columba left Ireland to be a missionary to the Northern Picts, Adomnán only wrote that Columba 'glorified the God of the

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[173] This is how I read the *Life*: it is unclear how many real journeys were made by Columba across Druim Alban: *cf.* Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, nn. 283, 300.
[174] *VC*, §i.34.
[175] The portaging time in places along the route may have been too long or too taxing: Christine Philips, 'Portages in Early Medieval Scotland. The Great Glen Route and the Forth-Clyde Isthmus', in Christer Westerdahl (ed.), *The Significance of Portages: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Significance of Portages, 29th Sept – 2nd Oct 2004, in Lyngdal, Vest-Agder, Norway, Arranged by the County Municipality of Vest-Adger, Kristiansand* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 194-6; *VC*, §ii.27.
[176] *VC*, §ii.42.
[177] Alexander Durand Cameron, *The Caledonian Canal*, 4th edn (Edinburgh, 2005), pp. 6-17, 23-4; John Knox, *A Commercial Map of Scotland* (London, 1788): https://maps.nls.uk/view/74400632 (12 Mar. 2025). This also follows the 'peninsular road' model offered by Wooding: *Communication and Commerce*, p. 107.

Christians' in Pictland, not that he established Christianity beyond Druim Alban.[178] In contrast, the *Amrae Coluimb Chille* recounted that:

> [Columba's] blessing conquered the rude mouths
> [of those] who were near the Tay – [it was] the King's wish'.[179]

This suggests that Columba was active, possibly as a missionary, among the Southern Picts too.[180] James Fraser has suggested that Adomnán's account differs from these other visions of Columba's journey into Pictland for crucial political reasons.[181] Adomnán was being careful not to irritate those who believed Columba only Christianised the Northern Picts: those in southern Scotland, according to Bede, claimed that they had been introduced to Christianity by earlier missionaries.[182] Adomnán wanted to balance this view with the established tradition of Iona's monks who asserted the importance of Columba in converting all of Pictland.[183] As a result, the geography and dealings of Columba in Pictland are often left ambiguous and vague, or otherwise focused on his journey up the Great Glen because of this conflict.[184]

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[178] *HE*, §iii.4; *VC*, §ii.27.
[179] *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §§viii.5-6:
*cloisius borb béolu bendacht*
*bátar oc Taë – tol Ríg*.
[180] I agree with Charles-Edwards that even this account is vague, and could mean missionary activity, preaching to Bridei and his household, or a debate with his advisors: *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 304-5. Contrast Jacopo Bisagni's claim that this passage is a retrospective adjustment to Columba's mission to place the saint in the vicinity of Dunkeld: *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, pp. 213-17.
[181] Fraser, 'Adomnán, Cumméne Ailbe, and the Picts', pp. 183-98.
[182] On the account of St Ninian and his conversion of the Southern Picts as described by Bede (*HE*, §iii.4), see esp. Clancy, 'The Real St Ninian', pp. 1-28, and James Fraser, 'Northumbrian Whithorn and the Making of St Ninian', *Innes Review*, 53:1 (2002), pp. 40-59. *Cf.* with the criticisms of G.W.S. Barrow, *Saint Ninian and Pictomania* (Whithorn, 2004), pp. 7-10; John MacQueen, *St Nynia*, new edn (Edinburgh, 2005), pp. 152-61, 167-8; Jonathan Wooding, 'St Ninian: Archaeology and the *Dossier* of the Saint', in Jane Murray (ed.), *St Ninian and the Earliest Christianity in Scotland: Papers from the Conference Held by The Friends of the Whithorn Trust in Whithorn on September 15th 2007* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 11-13, 15-16; and the response by Thomas Owen Clancy, 'The Big Man, the Footsteps, and the Fissile Saint: Paradigms and Problems in Studies of Insular Saints' Cults', in Steve Boardman and Eila Williamson (eds.), *The Cult of Saints and the Virgin Mary in Medieval Scotland* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 5-9. See also the most recent work by M.D. Laynesmith, 'Bede, Aelred of Rievaulx, and the Lost Anglo-Saxon Prose Life of Saint Ninian', *Innes Review*, 70:2 (2019), pp. 205-12.
[183] Fraser, 'Adomnán, Cumméne Ailbe, and the Picts', pp. 193-8.
[184] *Ibid*., p. 197.

However, the ambiguity with which Adomnán treated Pictland may simply be because he was paying greater attention to Ireland. The greater space afforded to Ireland in the *Life* shows that Adomnán had greater political and diplomatic interests in Ireland, even if the abbot may have had a Pictish audience in mind for portions of the hagiography.[185] It is significant that the only example in the *Life* of an Ionan monk crossing beyond the 'Spine of Britain', outside of Columba's entourage in his single expedition, was Cormac arriving there seemingly by mistake.[186] In contrast there are numerous examples in the *Life* of individual monks who took voyages to Ireland and back.[187] Also, for an abbot like Adomnán who had likely spent almost all his pre-abbatial life in Ireland,[188] and perhaps much of his career as abbot excluded from Iona itself,[189] it is possible that he could not speak with much authority on Pictish politics or geography to the same degree as with Ireland. James Fraser was correct to wonder how the activities of Columba in Pictland would have been represented if a new hagiography of the saint had been written by a different author, at a different time, with perhaps a greater interest in Pictland.[190]

Only three journeys to Northumbria are discussed in the *Life of Columba*; two related to Adomnán's own diplomatic missions to the court of his friend King Aldfrith.[191] The Irish annals and Bede revealed that Adomnán made at least the first of these journeys primarily to recover sixty hostages taken by the Northumbrian king Ecgfrith in a raid on the Irish midlands.[192] Bede said that Adomnán was sent by his

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[185] Fraser, 'Adomnán, Cumméne Ailbe, and the Picts', pp. 196-7.
[186] *VC*, §ii.42.
[187] *VC*, §§i.2, i.18, i.35, ii.4-5, ii.15, ii.38-9.
[188] Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 47-8; McAlary, 'Early mechanisms of abbatial succession', pp. 93-4.
[189] *HE*, §§v.15, v.21; *cf*. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 49-50.
[190] Fraser, 'Adomnán, Cumméne Ailbe, and the Picts', pp. 197-8.
[191] *VC*, §ii.46.
[192] *AT*, §689.6; *AU*, §§685.2, 687.5; Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, §§687.5 n. 6, 689.9 n. 1; *HE*, §v.15.

kin to conduct this diplomatic mission, *a sua gente*: the Irish midlands were under the control of the Uí Néill.[193] The route used by Adomnán may have followed the rivers Clyde and Tweed, first landing around Strathclyde; or otherwise, he may have headed north, via Inchmahome or Inchcolm and down the coast from the Firth of Forth on the east coast of Scotland.[194] One would expect that these trips were long and tedious, made up of loch-hopping and a great deal of walking. There are two passing references to both these routes in the *Life*, but they offer nowhere near the level of detail present for travel in the Dál Riata journeys, those to Ireland, or even the journeys up the Great Glen.[195] The final journey appeared in the first chapter of the *Life*: King Oswald of Northumbria, after defeating Cadwallon, went and spoke with Abbot Ségéne relating a miracle of St Columba.[196] The story leaves it unclear whether it was King Oswald making a journey to Iona, or whether abbot Ségéne travelled to Northumbria in a high-profile mission to a new ecclesiastical colony of his monastic *familia*.[197]

Jean-Michel Picard has argued that these three important stories and journeys made to Northumbria reveal that Adomnán had an Anglo-Saxon audience that he was courting when he wrote his *Life of Columba*: his main hope was to rehabilitate the

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[193] *HE*, §v.15. On the potential Uí Néill and Ionan conspiracy to place Aldfrith on the throne as the cause of this raid, see Moisl, 'The Bernician Royal Dynasty', pp. 103-26.
[194] Simon Taylor, 'Columba East of Drumalban: Some Aspects of the Cult of Columba in Eastern Scotland', *Innes Review*, 51:2 (2000), pp. 114, 130; *id*., '"The Iona of the East": Inchcolm, Dunkeld and the Cult of Columba in Eastern Scotland', in Evemalm-Graham, with Clancy and Márkus (eds.), *Ì Chaluim Chille*, pp. 389-90. The tenth-century Irish *Life of Adomnán* has the abbot depart from Ireland, potentially reaching Northumbria via the Solway Firth: *Betha Adamnáin*, ed. and trans. Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain, *Betha Adamnáin: The Irish Life of Adamnán* (London, 1988), §12(8); Reeves, *Life of Saint Columba*, p. xlv, n. k; *cf.* Patrick Wadden, '*Trácht Romra* and the Northumbrian Episode in *Betha Adamnáin*', *Ériu*, 62 (2012), pp. 105-11.
[195] *VC*, §i.15, §i.31. On the watershed near Tyndrum being Druim Alban and the route east, see Philp M. Dunshea, '*Druim Alban*, *Dorsum Britanniae* – "the Spine of Britain"', *Scottish Historical Review*, 92:2 (2013), pp. 283-9.
[196] *VC*, §i.1.
[197] This may be the same occasion that Oswald requested a bishop from Ségéne (Sharpe *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 43): *HE*, §§iii.3, iii.5.

image of Columba.[198] Yet any revival of Ionan influence in Northumbria was unlikely. A letter sent by the abbot Ceolfrith of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow to Nechtan, king of the Picts, was preserved in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and adds some detail to Adomnán's own account of his journeys to Northumbria.[199] This letter detailed how Pictland should adopt the Dionysian dating of Easter instead of the dating used by Iona. This was to the advantage of both Ceolfrith and Nechtan: the former wanted to build a relationship with the Picts at the expense of Iona; and the latter had potentially turned against the Ionan Church for political as well as religious reasons.[200] Even if Adomnán was given something of a positive treatment by Bede and Ceolfrith, the Irishman still seems to have been met with a great deal of hostility in his Northumbrian travels. Ceolfrith even told Adomnán that his religious practices would prevent him from achieving salvation.[201] Looking also at Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, Northumbrian opinion had hardened irreparably against Iona and those who followed the Columban dating of Easter: while Cuthbert's final words urged his monks to '"always keep peace and divine charity amongst yourselves"' and to show hospitality to other '"servants of Christ"', they should '"have no communion with those who depart from the unity of the catholic peace, either in not celebrating Easter at the proper time or in evil living"'; charity and peace clearly had its limits.[202] Adomnán emphasised that his visit to Northumbria was to his 'friend' the king; there did not seem to be many other friends for an Ionan monk left in the kingdom, and

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[198] Yorke, 'Adomnán at the Court of King Aldfrith', pp. 48-50; Jean-Michel Picard, 'The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', *Peritia*, 1 (1982), pp. 172-5.
[199] *HE*, §§v.21; see also, v.15.
[200] Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 275-82.
[201] *HE*, §§v.21.
[202] Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, §39; Woods, 'Adomnán, Plague, and the Easter Controversy', n. 7. While Bede cited the abbot Herefrith of Lindisfarne for this account (§37), the *Anonymous Life of Cuthbert* written by the one of the Brethren of Lindisfarne did not include this speech: does this show a hardening of opinion by the time of Bede? Or the existence of a 'middle party' in Northumbria? See, Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 336-7; Picard, 'The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', pp. 172-5; Yorke, 'Adomnán at the Court of King Aldfrith', pp. 48-9.

this potentially explains why the abbot emphasised the devastation of God's plague.[203] The lack of connectivity between Iona and Northumbria in the *Life* reflected the social breakdown in relations and the demonisation of the Ionan community.

This was not always the case. Bede's account of the Ionan conversion of Northumbria shows that there had been great deal of movement between Iona and its new ecclesiastical province.[204] Much like Adomnán's discussion of Pictland, one can wonder if an Ionan hagiography written before the Synod of Whitby would have given more attention to the missionary monks that brought Columban monasticism, holiness, and learning to Anglo-Saxon Britain.[205] This shows the difficulty in using Adomnán's *Life* to unpick the potential connectivity of Iona in the insular world: it is a text that is deeply tied to the author that wrote it and his historical context. There are however examples in the *Life* that offer some glimpse at the real movement of Ionan monks in the insular world, and these stories are connected mostly to ocean movement. Many of these are journeys that took place in Dál Riata: it is in this geography that the reader gets the best sense of the real ocean hazards, the routeways taken by the monks, and the social geography that overlaid the physical landscape. For much of the insular world this deep landscape is absent. It only appears in a few references to Ireland. Ireland was also the only location where the ocean was the primary method of connectivity with Iona. While Adomnán's agenda, interests, and movements explain to some extent why Northumbria and Pictland did not feature prominently in the connective web of Iona's social network (though they were certainly significant arenas of Ionan influence), the power of ocean connectivity, and

[203] *VC*, §ii.46.
[204] *HE*, §§iii.3, iii.5, iii.17, iii.21, iii.24-6.
[205] *HE*, §iii.5.

geographical reality, also reflected why Ireland was more important. Even the journeys to Ireland lacked the level of detail one reads in the Dál Riata journeys: ocean connectivity, while it has been used as a catch-all explanation for how Irish monasteries maintained their far-flung *paruchiae*, also had a range of effectiveness. For Iona, the ocean seems to have been a tool to manage its local seascape. Its usefulness broke down in an insular context and, as is seen below, in its global context too.

Iona and the Western Sealanes

Five journeys in the *Life of Columba* appear as 'global' examples of ocean movement. Four of these are Ionan monks setting off into the ocean to seek retreats.[206] The fifth of this small collection of 'global' journeys tells the story of Gallic sailors arriving in the North of Britain bringing news of a great fire that had consumed an Italian city.[207] One mention of continental links would suggest the Iona was poorly connected to potential global ocean networks of trade and movement. This paucity must, however, be placed in the context of a large body of archaeological research that has built up the evidence for global sea networks linking the British Isles to the wider medieval world. While the above example of Columba meeting Gallic sailors has been used to support these models, perhaps the *Life* misrepresents the global connectivity that was available to Iona.

These Gallic sailors could have exemplified the patterns of trade voyages into the North of Britain through the Irish sea.[208] Arriving at the *caput regionis*, 'the capital of the district', the most likely port of call for these sailors was the major

[206] *VC*, §§i.6, i.20, ii.42.
[207] *VC*, §i.28.
[208] Thomas, '"*Gallici Nautae de Galliarum Provinciis*"', pp. 2-3; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 135; Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, p. 96.

Dálriatan fort at Dunadd.[209] A cross-marked quern discovered at Dunadd, the same shape as crosses found on Iona, showed the close links between this royal seat and the monastery.[210] These sailors would have probably brought high value goods with them, otherwise unavailable to the kings and churchmen of the insular world. Trade links may have also opened up Ireland to the manuscripts and ideas Iona's monks used to build their intellectual traditions.[211] Traders between Ireland and Gaul were certainly how the companions of Columbanus returned to Ireland, and Irish traders provided St Philibert and his monks with shoes and clothes.[212] In a ninth-century Irish text, the *Instructions of Cormac*, a marker of thriving kingship was 'inviting barks into harbour' and 'importing treasures from over the sea'.[213] Archaeological digs at Dunadd have shown that these trade links existed, finding a substantial collection of continental pottery and imported glass.[214] Pottery typically gained its value from the high status goods it contained for events of conspicuous consumption: these may have included wine, olive oil, herbs, and honey.[215] Some pottery at Dunadd seems to have been stained with reddish-purple dye from Dyer's

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[209] *Cf*. above, n. 92.
[210] Campbell, 'A Cross-Marked Quern from Dunadd', pp. 105-17.
[211] Jonathan Wooding, 'Trade as a Factor in the Transmission of Texts Between Ireland and the Continent in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries', in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds.), *Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Transmission / Irland and Europa im Früheren Mittelalter: Texte und Überlieferung* (Dublin, 2002), pp. 14-26; *cf*. Edward James, 'Ireland and Western Gaul in the Merovingian period', in Whitelock, McKitterick, and Dumville (eds.), *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, pp. 362-86.
[212] Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, §i.23; *Vita S. Filiberti*, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, MGH, SRM 5 (Hannover and Leipzig, 1910), §42. Archaeological evidence shows that Iona's monks were making cow and deer-leather shoes: Groenman-van Waateringe, 'The Leather from Ditch 1', pp. 318-28. On the relationship between Ireland and western Gaul, see the papers in Jean-Michel Picard (ed.), *Aquitaine and Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 1995).
[213] *Tecosca Cormaic*, ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer, *The Instructions of King Cormac Mac Airt* (Dublin, 1909), §1, ll. 25-6.
[214] Lane and Campbell, *Dunadd*, pp. 98-103, 171-7.
[215] Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports*, pp. 79-81, 114; Lane and Campbell, *Dunadd*, pp. 241-3. Residue analysis of Italian amphorae have shown that they contained wine but also that pottery was reused for different products: see Alessandra Pecci, Laura Salvini, and Federico Cantini, 'Residue Analysis of Some Late Roman Amphora Coming from the Excavations of the Historical Centre of Florence', in Simonetta Menchelli *et al*. (eds.), *LRCW3 Late Roman Coarse Wares, Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean: Archaeology and Archaeometry, Comparison Between Western and Eastern Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 364-5.

madder (*Rubia tinctorum*), which is not native to Britain, and points towards the importation of goods for craft purposes.[216] Pottery was also, however, valuable in its own right to a 'largely aceramic audience', and vessels could be redistributed by the importer.[217]

Patterns of trade between insular ports and the continent have been linked to the Church's need to import wine for the sacraments. This theory has its origins in the work of Heinrich Zimmer who linked the Christianisation of Ireland to the importance of the wine trade with Bordeaux.[218] Adomnán mentioned wine twice in his *Life*, and stressed that 'on a certain feast day no wine whatsoever could be found for the sacrificial mystery' emphasising that it was essential for the Mass.[219] Charles Thomas's 'E Class' pottery (hereafter E-Ware), which dominated ceramic imports from the late sixth-century to the early eighth, was potentially an adjunct to the trade of wine from western Gaul, and was most likely produced in Bordeaux.[220] Most of the ceramic material found at Dunadd was E-Ware, and one shard has been found on

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[216] Ewan Campbell, 'The Archaeological Evidence for External Contacts: Imports, Trade and Economy in Celtic Britain A.D. 400-800', in K.R. Dark (ed.), *External Contacts and the Economy of Late Roman and Post-Roman Britain* (Woodbridge, 1996), p. 92; Lane and Campbell, *Dunadd*, p. 100.

[217] *Bethu Brigte*, ed. and trans. Donncha Ó hAodha (Dublin, 1978), §30; Harold Mytum, 'High Status Vessels in Early Historic Ireland: A Reference in the *Bethu Brigte*', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 5:3 (1986), pp. 375-8; *id*., *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 266-7. *Cf*. Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, pp. 81-2. It could also signal a level of '*Romanitas*' while being more widely distributed than previously thought: Ian Doyle, 'Mediterranean and Frankish pottery Imports in Early Medieval Ireland', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology*, 18 (2009), pp. 34-6.

[218] Heinrich Zimmer, 'Über Direkte Handelsverbindungen Westgalliens mit Irland im Altertum und Frühen Mittelalter, I-V', *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Jan. to Jun. 1909), pp. 363-400, 430-76, 543-80, 582-613; (Jul. to Dec. 1910), pp. 1031-98, 1098-119, esp. 430-76. Notable adherents to this model include: Richard Hodges, 'Some Early Medieval French Wares in the British Isles: An Archaeological Assessment of the Early French Wine Trade with Britain', in D.P.S. Peacock (ed.), *Pottery and Early Commerce: Characterizations and Trade in Roman and Later Ceramics* (London, 1977), pp. 240-1; Thomas, '"*Gallici Nautae de Galliarum Provinciis*", pp. 16-17.

[219] *VC*, §§i.50, ii.1: *quadam sollemni die vinum ad sacrificiale misterium cassu aliquo minime inveniebatur*.

[220] On E-Ware, see: Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports*, pp. 32-52; Thomas, 'Imported Pottery in Dark-Age Western Britain', pp. 96-9. On its connection to the wine trade, see: Thomas, '"*Gallici Nautae de Galliarum Provinciis*", pp. 16-17. On the latest evidence for the area of E-Ware production, see: Dugan, *Links to Late Antiquity*, pp. 100-15.

Iona, underlining the potential links between these sites.[221] Zimmer's model has been effectively dismantled by Jonathan Wooding.[222] Wine does not seem to have been an important import that drove the creation of these sealinks: Bede records that the vine grew in Ireland;[223] wine itself was watered down substantially for the Mass;[224] Adomnán's mention of wine seems to point to it being used for occasional and significant days;[225] and wine did not have to be made from grapes necessarily, fruit being an alternative.[226] Wine instead was just one possible item among various imports that arrived in Dunadd, connecting northern Britain to both continental and Mediterranean goods.

There has been a great deal written on the potential global network of ocean movement that brought goods from the Mediterranean up the Atlantic coasts of Europe and into the Irish Sea basin. The most excavated site on this journey has been Tintagel, which started investigations into this potential pattern of global connectivity.[227] Principally, it was the shards of amphorae discovered there, large storage jugs mostly from the eastern Mediterranean containing luxury contents, that sparked interest in the ocean links between the insular world and the far-away

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[221] Lane and Campbell, *Dunadd*, pp. 98-103; Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, p. 22.
[222] Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, pp. 1-3, 32-40.
[223] *HE*, §i.1.
[224] *The Irish Tract on the Mass*, ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, *The Irish Passages in the Stowe Missal* (Calcutta, 1881), pp. 5-6, 8.
[225] *VC*, §ii.1.
[226] Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports*, p. 79. Overall, see the discussion by Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, pp. 32-4.
[227] C.A. Ralegh Radford, 'Imported Pottery Found at Tintagel, Cornwall', in D.B. Harden (ed.), *Dark-Age Britain. Studies Presented to E.T. Leeds* (London, 1956), pp. 59-70; Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports*, pp. 120-1; Dugan, *Links to Late Antiquity*, pp. 65-70; J.A. Nowakowski, 'Cornwall in Late Antiquity: Recent Excavations and Research' (unpublished paper, delivered 16 February 2023, Worcester College, University of Oxford): https://youtu.be/1mVDnjdhBBI?si=pKKtKSXy0mku7xZ8 (30 Apr. 2025); J.A. Nowakowski *et al*., *New Excavations at Tintagel Castle, North Cornwall: TCARP 2016-2017* (forthcoming); Maria Duggan, Mark Jackson, and Sam Turner (eds.), *Ceramics and Atlantic Connections: Late Roman and Early Medieval Imported Pottery on the Atlantic Seaboard, Proceedings of an International Symposium at Newcastle University, March 2014* (Oxford, 2020); Rachel C. Barrowman, Colleen E. Batey, and Christophe D. Morris, *Excavations at Tintagel Castle, Cornwall, 1990-1999* (London, 2007); Thomas, 'Imported Pottery in Dark-Age Western Britain', p. 89.

Mediterranean.[228] This flow of Mediterranean goods into the Irish Sea predated Columba's exile from Ireland (probably a period from the late-fifth to mid-sixth century),[229] but a shard of African Red Slipware that may have been part of this moment of trade has been found on Iona.[230] This was probably the result of secondary redistribution, or perhaps even evidence for pilgrimage to the Mediterranean.[231] Yet Mediterranean goods were still moving northwards after this period to Dunadd: crystalline orpiment (arsenic sulphide), likely from the Mediterranean, has been found in excavations there. This bright yellow material was used as pigment in the Ionan *Book of Kells* and the *Book of Durrow*.[232] Also, a glass tessera with inlaid gold leaf, commonly part of Byzantine mosaics, was discovered at Dunadd. This was another Mediterranean import, probably sourced from Italy or the Levant.[233] These high-status imports found at Dunadd, along with Columba's meeting with Gallic sailors there, gives the impression that this royal centre mediated the monks' access to trade that came from the Mediterranean world.[234]

Few claim that Iona, or even the north of Dál Riata, was connected directly to these patterns of ocean movement. Jonathan Wooding has placed Iona and the territories north of the Mull of Kintyre into a zone of secondary contact with these traders. Whereas the Clyde estuary seems to have been a primary ventricle for trade,

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[228] Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports*, pp. 18-24
[229] Carl Thorpe, with Colleen E. Batey, 'Ceramics: Post-Romano Imported', in Barrowman, Batey, and Morris, *Excavations at Tintagel Castle*, pp. 245-6; Nowakowski, 'Cornwall in Late Antiquity: Recent Excavations and Research'.
[230] Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports*, pp. 17-18, 26; Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, p. 19.
[231] Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports*, p. 26.
[232] *Ibid*., pp. 116-17; Lane and Campbell, *Dunadd*, pp. 212, 246-7; Robert Fuchs and Doris Oltrogge, 'Colour Material and Painting Technique in the Book of Kells', in Felicity O'Mahony (ed.), *The Book of Kells: Proceedings of a Conference at Trinity College Dublin 6-9 September 1992* (Aldershot, 1994), pp. 134-5; the classical sources for this orpiment were Vesuvius and Asia minor, but it is also found in Spain.
[233] Lane and Campbell, *Dunadd*, p. 173.
[234] *VC*, §i.28.

any ventures around the Mull of Kintyre would not only involve traders back-tracking to go northwards, but also meant they would have faced the dangerous conditions around Rathlin Island and Kintyre discussed above.[235] Wooding has offered a 'peninsular road' model for trade north of Kintyre that fits the evidence for minimal E-Ware distribution outside of Dunadd: because this royal seat was located on an isthmus, landing on the eastern coast of Kintyre and moving goods to Dunadd for redistribution avoided the dangers at the end of the peninsula.[236] The paucity of E-Ware finds north of Strangford Lough and west of Kintyre in Ireland also shows that this northern zone received little, if any, direct trade along the coast.[237] That only one shard of E-Ware has been recovered on Iona leads one to doubt even the extent of the indirect trade it received through Dunadd.[238]

These Atlantic seaways have gained in scholarly interest in recent years. The monograph of Maria Duggan has, most notably, synthesised continental research in France and the Iberian Peninsula to rethink the ocean-trade between the Mediterranean, the continent, and Britain from the fifth to the seventh centuries. Previously the ceramic evidence in Britain and Ireland for trade with the Mediterranean and the continent had been widely seen as exceptional, and provided evidence for direct and deliberate links between these regions.[239] Finds of amphorae in Spain and western France, and E-Ware in France and Spain, have proved that the assemblages in Britain and Ireland are not as exceptional as they may have seemed: discoveries of imported ceramic at Vigo in particular, a potential emporium, have

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[235] Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, pp. 101-2.
[236] *Ibid*., p. 107.
[237] Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports*, pp. 109-17, Figure 77.
[238] Reece, *Excavations in Iona*, p. 22.
[239] The key article is Michael G. Fulford, 'Byzantium and Britain: A Mediterranean Perspective on Post-Roman Mediterranean Imports in Western Britain and Ireland', *Medieval Archaeology*, 33:1 (1989), pp. 1-6; Ewan Campbell followed Fulford mostly in the previous synthesis of evidence: *Continental and Mediterranean Imports*, pp. 126-32; for a summary of the wider scholarship, see Duggan, *Links to Late Antiquity*, pp. 16-26.

helped pave the way to criticise the previous model.[240] These Atlantic sites provide the evidence that Britain and Ireland were part of a larger network of trade and ocean-movement that was 'persistent, but fluctuating'.[241] As imports from the Mediterranean ceased in the mid-sixth-century, Bordeaux and western Gaul took over as the principal hub in this network of Atlantic exchange that continued to move continental goods northwards to Britain and Ireland.[242] Trans-shipment of goods between many ports and traders along these coasts is the model put forward by Duggan. Scholars have however, continued to produce evidence for direct connections between the insular world and the Mediterranean into the late sixth and seventh centuries. On the other side of Britain and in recent research on Sutton Hoo, Helen Gittos has argued that Anglo-Saxons served as mercenaries in Byzantine armies, bringing Mediterranean goods back with them.[243] This was just one of many direct connections between the early medieval Isles and the Near East. Adomnán in fact wrote one of the most remarkable sources that showed a direct connection between Iona and the eastern Mediterranean: *On the Holy Places*. This was a travel story recounting the movements of a Gallic bishop named Arculf in Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Constantinople, and Rome, before he supposedly met Adomnán and relayed his story.[244]

The account preserved in Bede tells us that the bishop arrived in Britain after being blown off-course or shipwrecked when returning to Gaul from the Holy

[240] Aldolfo Fernández, *El Comercio Tardoantiguo (ss.IV-VII) en el Noroeste Peninsular a Través del Registro Cerámico de la Ría de Vigo* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 335-73; Duggan, *Links to Late Antiquity*, pp. 91-149.
[241] Duggan, *Links to Late Antiquity*, p. 160.
[242] *Ibid*.
[243] Helen Gittos, 'Sutton Hoo and Syria: The Anglo-Saxons Who Served in the Byzantine Army?', *English Historical Review*, 139, no. 601 (2024), pp. 1323-58.
[244] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §pref.; *HE*, §v.15.

Land.[245] These details were only preserved in Bede, perhaps because he wanted to provide a plausible explanation as to how a Gallic bishop ended up in northern Britain.[246] Yet Bede was a young man when Adomnán gave his *On the Holy Places* as a gift to King Aldfrith. Bede's account of Arculf's journey is also consistent across two sources. Was this a story the abbot of Iona told himself during his tour of Northumbrian monasteries? In any case, Adomnán did not reveal how or where he met Arculf. Thomas O'Loughlin has however analysed the possible mental maps used by the Ionan abbot and his monks to account for how the ocean potentially connected the insular world to the Near East.[247] An obvious issue in believing that Arculf came to Britain by sea directly is that travelling over land from the south coast of Gaul certainly offered a quicker route to wherever he lived than sailing out into the North Atlantic.[248] Yet, depending on what maps were available to an early medieval reader, this may not have been as obvious. Bede certainly did not see an issue with taking the ocean route around Spain. A map probably available to Adomnán and the monks of Iona was the 'T-O' map present in Isidore of Seville's *On the Nature of Things*.[249] Using this map alone, one would not know that Gaul bordered both the ocean and the Mediterranean: a sea voyage that might pass the British Isles in order to reach Gaul would have made sense.[250] One can never know if

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[245] *HE*, §v.15; Bede, *On the Holy Places*, trans. William Trent Foley, *Bede: A Biblical Miscellany* (Liverpool, 1999), §xix.4-5; *cf*. Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §pref.
[246] O'Loughlin, 'The View from Iona', p. 102, n. 22.
[247] O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, pp. 143-75; *id*., 'Living in the Ocean', pp. 11-23; *id*., 'The View from Iona', pp. 98-122. I have also argued that there was an overlapping set of mental maps used by Adomnán for Iona's local and global ocean geography: '"Rowing Through the Infinite Storm": Iona's Mental Map of its Ocean Geography in the Life of St Columba', in Evemalm-Graham, with Clancy and Márkus (eds.), *Ì Chaluim Chille*, pp. 19-35.
[248] Theodore of Tarsus travelled to Britain overland after landing in Marseilles, then on to Arles, Paris, and crossed the channel near Étaples; John the Archcantor also took a route overland from Rome to Britain: *HE*, §§iv.1, iv.18(16).
[249] Based on evidence in *On the Holy Places* Adomnán had access to both Isidore's *Etymologies* and his *On the Nature of Things*: Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The Library of Iona in the Late Seventh Century: The Evidence from Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', *Ériu*, 45 (1994), pp. 47-9.
[250] O'Loughlin, 'The View from Iona', pp. 111-12.

this route was in the mind of Adomnán when he wrote his *On the Holy Places*, but it seems a great coincidence that it mirrors the Western Sealanes discussed above. Arculf, in this case, could be seen as not only a source for Iona's connections to a global medieval world, but also evidence that those earlier ocean networks of trade continued to link the monastery to the Mediterranean.

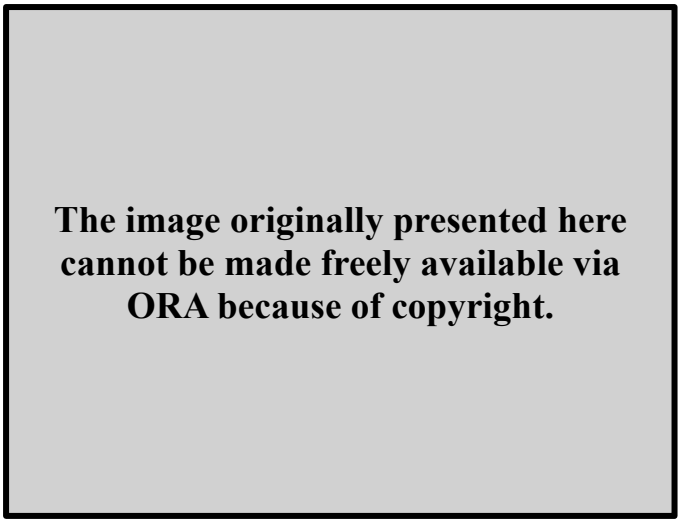


*Figure 4. Thomas O'Loughlin's Hypothetical T-O map of Arculf's journey*.[251]

Yet Thomas O'Loughlin has suggested that to read Adomnán's *On the Holy Places* as a reliable record of the bishop Arculf's memories and journey in the Holy Land is a 'naïve' way to approach the text.[252] The potential identity of Arculf is a long-standing debate.[253] O'Loughlin has argued that it is more likely that Arculf, even if he was a real person, became a fabrication to lend greater authority to Adomnán's own research, reading, and exegetical thought about the holy places.[254] Adomnán borrowed heavily from Jerome's *Liber de Situ et Nominibus*, using it in

[251] O'Loughlin, 'The View from Iona', Figure 4.
[252] O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, p. 62.
[253] An early author to call into question Arculf's identity was François Chatillon, 'Arculfe a-t-il Réellement Existé?', *Revue du Moyen Âge Latin*, 23 (1967), pp. 134-8; another work of French scholarship on the subject is Nathalie Delierneux, 'Arculfe, *Sanctus Episcopus Gente Gallus*: Une Existence Historique Discutable', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 75:4 (1997), pp. 911-41.
[254] O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, pp. 62-3; Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Adomnán and Arculf: The Case of an Expert Witness', *Journal of Medieval Latin*, 7 (1997), pp. 127-46.

almost every chapter of book two of *On the Holy Places*.[255] Where Adomnán implied the direct testimony of Arculf was used, he simply copied or largely re-wrote his written sources.[256] In other cases where Arculf's direct testimony appeared, it was inaccurate, and called into question whether he was a real person and whether *On the Holy Places* is truly an authoritative source that reveals the global patterns of ocean movement Iona was linked to.[257]

Adomnán's account did however show some contemporary knowledge of changes in the Holy Land. Arculf mentioned that Jerusalem and Palestine were under new rulers at the time of writing, detailing that the 'Saracens' had built a 'quadrangle prayer house' in Jerusalem on Temple Mount.[258] Adomnán also revealed that Damascus was the capital where the new king reigned, and where even the 'unbelieving Saracens have built a church'.[259] Adomnán recorded an interesting story where the 'king of the Saracens named Mavias' resolved a dispute between 'Jewish Christians' and 'unbelieving Jews'.[260] The shroud that covered Jesus's body when he lay in the tomb had been stolen by a 'believing Jew' and passed down through the generations until it came into the possession of 'unbelieving Jews'.[261] Having enriched the 'unbelieving Jews', the shroud became the source of a rivalry in

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[255] O'Loughlin, 'The library of Iona', pp. 35, 38.
[256] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §ii.30; O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, p. 147; Meehan, *De Locis Sanctis*, pp. 16-17.
[257] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §ii.9-10; O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, pp. 58-9, 92.
[258] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §i.1. Lawrence Nees sees Adomnán's account of the Mosque on Temple Mount and the new 'Saracen' occupiers of the Near East simply as a 'diatribe'; evidence that Arculf did not exist: Lawrence Nees, 'Insular Latin Sources, "Arculf," and Early Islamic Jerusalem', in Michael Frassetto, John Hosler, and Matthew Gabriele (eds.), *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Essays on Medieval Europe in Honor of Daniel F. Callahan* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 86, 95-9; Lawrence Nees, *Perspectives on Early Islamic Art in Jerusalem* (Leiden, 2016), pp. 39-40, 53-7.
[259] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §ii.28.
[260] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §i.9. Thomas O'Loughlin has suggested that 'Judean' is the better translation, and that Adomnán was speaking in terms of ethnicity rather than religion: 'Palestine in the Aftermath of the Arab Conquest: The Earliest Latin Account', *Studies in Church History*, 36 (2000), p. 83; *cf*. Robert G. Hoyland and Sarah Waidler, 'Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis* and the Seventh Century Near East', *English Historical Review*, 129, no. 539 (2014), p. 795, n. 35.
[261] John 20:7.

Jerusalem between the two factions. When the authority of Mavias was invoked 'by both parties', he cast the shroud over the fire to test which group deserved it more. The shroud floated up in the air and drifted down to the Christian party. It became a key relic in one of Jerusalem's churches where Arculf saw it venerated and kissed it himself. This Mavias is certainly Mu'āwiya, founder of the Umayyad dynasty of Caliphs, who reigned from *c*.AD 661 to AD 680, but who governed Syria from *c*.AD 639.[262] This is one of the best narrative accounts of the early medieval Near East, and it showed the important role early Muslim rulers had in conducting religious affairs.[263]

However, Mu'āwiya was portrayed by Adomnán seemingly as a Christian himself, offering a kind of profession of faith.[264] As Mark Whittow memorably put it, in the imagination of Adomnán Palestine existed in a state of limbo between the biblical past and the present: 'it was as if Muhammed had never happened'.[265] This oddity was dismissed by Robert Hoyland and Sarah Waidler who argued that Adomnán may have just been misinformed about Mu'āwiya's faith; even so, it was both a Christian and Islamic trope to have those of opposing faiths, even demons, recognise the saviour or the prophet as supreme.[266] One could also argue that

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[262] Martin Hinds, 'Mu'āwiya I', in P. Bearman (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)* (Leiden, 2012): https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5279 (30 Apr. 2025). A Greek inscription celebrating the renovation of the Roman baths at Gadara identifies Mu'āwiya as 'Maavia': 'Gadara (Area of Emmatha Gadarorum, el-Hammeh). Building Inscription Concerning the Renovation of the Hot Baths, 662 AD', in H.W. Pleket and R.S. Stroud (eds.), *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (Leiden, 1983): 30-1687, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.1163/1874-6772_seg_a30_1687 (30 Apr. 2025). I am grateful to Alex Woolf for this reference.

[263] In another instance, Mu'āwiya presided over a dispute between the Maronites and the Jacobites ordering the latter to pay him 20,000 *denarii* yearly: *The Maronite Chronicle*, trans. Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool, 1993), p. 30; see also, Hoyland and Waidler, 'Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', pp. 796-7.

[264] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §i.9; John 20:7; O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, pp. 173-5; *id*., 'Palestine in the Aftermath of the Arab Conquest', pp. 86-7.

[265] Mark Whittow, 'Pirenne, Muhammad, and Bohemond: Before Orientalism', G.E.M. Lippiatt and Jessalynn L. Bird (eds.), *Crusading Europe: Essays in Honour of Christopher Tyerman*, *Outremer*, 8 (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 37-8.

[266] Hoyland and Waidler, 'Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', pp. 793-7.

Mu'āwiya's ambiguous faith reflected the embryonic state of Islam in these early decades.[267] Hoyland and Waidler also held up these episodes, along with accounts from Constantinople, as crucial evidence that Adomnán had contact with Arculf or some other pilgrim who visited the Holy Land in the seventh century: real networks existed that connected Iona to the continent, and on to the eastern Mediterranean.[268]

David Woods has been the most vocal, and creative critic of the existence of Arculf, or any real pilgrim coming from the Holy Land to Britain.[269] Woods has suggested that whoever Adomnán's source was for the construction of the Mosque on Temple Mount must have visited Jerusalem between *c*.AD 657 and AD 662, when peace existed between the Arab and Byzantine empires.[270] In contrast, when comparing accounts of pilgrims visiting the Church of the Ascension outside the walls of Jerusalem, Woods has argued that the account used by Adomnán reflected Jerusalem *c*.AD 614 to AD 638, before the Muslim conquests.[271] For a single pilgrim to have made these two visits was technically possible, but incredibly unlikely. Woods's most imaginative counter-theory follows that Arculf was instead a pilgrim named 'Arnulf', and that he was sent to the Holy Land to collect relics. These relics were lost in a storm, and only a written description of them survived: Adomnán received some copy of this document and misread the pilgrim's name as Arculf:

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[267] Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge MA, 2010), pp. 170-7; *cf*. Robert G. Hoyland, 'Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East', *Al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣtā*, 25 (2017), pp. 113-40.
[268] Hoyland and Waidler, 'Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', pp. 793-807.
[269] He has explored this subject in a number of articles: David Woods, 'Adomnán, Arculf and the Mosque on the Temple Mount', *Ériu*, 66 (2016), pp. 179-90; *id*., 'Adomnán, Arculf, and the True Cross: Overlooked Evidence for the Visit of the Emperor Heraclius to Jerusalem c.630?', *ARAM Periodical*, 18-19 (2006-2007), pp. 403-13; *id*., 'Arculf, 'Umar, and the Church of the Ascension', *Byzantinoslavica*, 75:1-2 (2017), pp. 56-62; *id*., 'Arculf's Luggage', pp. 25-52; *id*., 'On the Circumstances of Adomnán's Composition of the *De Locis Sanctis*', in Wooding *et al*. (eds.), *Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, pp. 193-204.
[270] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §i.1; Woods, 'Adomnán, Arculf and the Mosque on the Temple Mount', pp. 189-90.
[271] Woods, 'Arculf, 'Umar, and the Church of the Ascension', p. 62.

'Adomnán never met an Arculf, or anyone similarly named'.[272] Any connectivity implied by Arculf's journey to Britain becomes far more tenuous if this was the case.

It is best to think of Adomnán's *On the Holy Places* as a work that proves the fragmentary connection Iona may have had to the global medieval world: neither the complete absence of connectivity, nor its vibrant existence. Much like the inclusion of the Gallic sailors arriving at Dunadd in the *Life of Columba*, a form of secondary connectivity is demonstrated. This fragmentary connectivity has important implications for the purpose of both the *Life of Columba* and *On the Holy Places*. Jean-Michel Picard has argued that Adomnán had a continental audience in mind when he wrote his *Life*, that the rivalries with Armagh and Kildare had repercussions outside the British Isles, and that the abbot of Iona harnessed different techniques to elevate the sanctity of Columba, while defending him against potential critics.[273] This potential audience was encapsulated in how Adomnán claimed at the end of the *Life* that:

> His name, though he remained on this tiny and most remote island of the Britannic Ocean, clearly deserves to be renowned not merely throughout our Ireland, and in Britain, the greatest of all the islands in the world, but also known as far as three-cornered Spain, in Gaul, and across the Pennine Alps in Italy, also to that city of Rome, which is the chief of all cities.[274]

*On the Holy Places* may have had a similar purpose. At least implicitly, it showed off Iona and its abbots as linked to the holiest places in Christian geography: while the likes of Cummian could claim that the Ionan monks were but 'pimples on the face of the earth', Adomnán revealed they had a direct connection to the very centre of

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[272] Woods, 'Arculf's Luggage', pp. 43-52; *id*., 'Arculf, 'Umar, and the Church of the Ascension', p. 62.
[273] Picard, 'The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', pp. 175-7.
[274] *VC*, §iii.23: *nomen eius non tantum per totam nostram Scotiam, et omnium totius orbis insularum maximam Brittanniam, clare devulgari promeruit in hac parua et extrema ociani brittanici commoratus insula, sed etiam ad trigonam usque Hispaniam, et Gallias, et ultra Alpes pininas Italiam sitam pervenire, ipsam quoque Romanam civitatem, quae caput est omnium civitatum*.

divine revelation.[275] Similarly David Woods has argued that Constantinople was given an in-depth treatment in *On the Holy Places* compared to the cursory mention of Rome because Adomnán wanted to stress that New Rome had superseded Old Rome (so lauded by the critics of Iona).[276] It is also telling that, despite this potential global audience, there is only one mention of continental travel in Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, and *On the Holy Places* only offered Iona's monks a second-hand level of connectivity mediated by continental experts. The purposes of these texts, as they relate to the geography and connectivity of Iona, are best understood differently.

Thomas O'Loughlin has argued that Arculf's journey is an apostolic map. Arculf's journey began in Jerusalem, where Christ died and rose again, but continued beyond the city to the lands described in the Bible, and onward to the lands of the Gentiles.[277] Arculf's journey to New Rome, to Old Rome, and his meeting of Adomnán in the British Isles, all modelled the gospel's spread to the limits of the known world. *On the Holy Places* brought distant Iona into relation with the locations of the biblical narrative as part of the same apostolic story, but it also emphasised the important task of Iona's monks teaching the gospel at the ends of the earth.[278] These texts did not aim to reveal the physical connectivity, or intellectual centrality of Iona. The monks understood they were secondary actors, if part of a shared religious history. Columba was saintly in the eyes of God despite dwelling on a 'little island on the edge of the ocean'.[279] Global seaways were not sources of

[275] Cummian, *De Controversia Paschali*, ll. 109-10.
[276] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §§iii.1-5; Woods, 'Adomnán, Arculf, and the True Cross', pp. 403-4. It may be significant that this contradicts Rome being 'the chief of all cities' in the *Life*.
[277] This is the mission as described in Luke (24:47), Acts (1:8), and parallels the abrupt end of Paul's mission ending in Rome (Acts 28:16; Rom. 15:19).
[278] O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, pp. 155-7, 159-60; *id*., 'The View from Iona', pp. 114-16.
[279] *VC*, §iii.23.

practical or social connectivity in the same way that the ocean operated locally or regionally for Iona.

## Conclusion

In the previous chapter I stressed that the ocean should be seen as the primary context that shaped the environment and sustainability of early medieval Iona. That was an argument focused on the material needs of the monastery: what ways the ocean created and tested those needs, and how the ocean environment could be used to overcome those fundamental challenges. The ability of the ocean to connect Iona, and subvert the isolating forces that island life created, was introduced as the solution to those questions of material need. This chapter has shown that ocean connectivity extended beyond meeting material needs, to serve Iona's social aims, and its global spiritual outlook.

The ultra-local archipelago of Iona was crucial to the monastery's existence and its social relationships. The ocean journeys captured in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* revealed how this archipelago could become layered with meaning. In the encounter between Berach and the whale, the practical dangers of the seascape that surrounded Iona were combined in a story that also modelled the correct monastic hierarchy on Iona. The Dál Riata seaways used by Iona's monks were also populated with the social geography of the monastery. More than any other geographical region covered in the *Life*, these journeys give the reader insight into the small-scale conflicts and tensions within an archipelago kingdom linked by seaways. Crucially, the Dál Riata journeys revealed the varied political messages held within the *Life*, the ability of Ionan monks to bridge political divides, and the extensive social hinterland of Iona. Little of this detail could be found in the examples of insular voyaging.

Instead, Adomnán's interests did a great deal to shape the detail afforded to these insular journeys. All the evidence points to an at-best secondary link between Iona and the wider medieval world, yet this connected the Ionan monks to global story Christian evangelism that they felt part of.

The ocean was a tool to treat the immediate social and material needs of the monastery. Regionally, it could be a connective force that would assist Iona achieving its political and diplomatic aims, principally in Ireland. Beyond this, the ocean isolated Iona physically, but offered an imaginative connectivity that was valuable to their religious mission. Overall, seaways and ocean movement were local forces for the monks of Iona, and they should be appreciated more for their power to connect close environments than any global connectivity they might have provided.

The current historiographical trend is for histories to be more global.[280] This drive exists in medieval history too.[281] Part of this turn is to see the ocean, seas, and rivers as fundamentally connective forces that cry out for networks, often global ones.[282] I see the ocean and waterways as more profoundly local forces: both for connectivity and for creating meaning. When *On the Holy Places* describes the Near East there is a wonder in these sources as well as a despair. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the birthplace of Christ, camels, crocodiles, and the Nile: the monks of Iona would never see these things.[283] The ocean played the primary role in creating the distance they despaired at. Yet *On the Holy Places* also provided these monks with an apostolic map, reminding them of their role in proclaiming the gospel at the

[280] Richard Drayton and David Motadel with responses from David Bell and Jeremy Adelman, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History*, 13:1 (2018), pp. 1-21; responding to David Bell, 'This is What Happens When Historians Overuse the Idea of the Network', *The New Republic* (Oct. 2013); and, Jeremy Adelman, 'What Is Global History Now?', *AEON* (Mar. 2017).
[281] See Holmes and Standen (eds.), *The Global Middle Ages*.
[282] Geraldine Heng, 'An Ordinary Ship and its Stories of Early Globalism', *Journal of Medieval Worlds*, 1:1 (2019), pp. 11-54; Shepard, 'Networks', pp. 116-19, 140-57.
[283] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §§i.2, ii.2, ii.12, ii.30.

ends of the earth. This mission collapsed the physical distance created by the ocean. The tactile stories one finds in Adomnán's work, where Arculf kisses the shroud of Christ and the chest that holds the fragments of the cross, are meant to be evoked mentally in a virtual pilgrimage.[284] If the ocean divided the monks of Iona from these relics physically, this text gave them the opportunity to be globally connected to them, in their mind, and spiritually, in their devotion: Christ's crucifixion, death, and rise, united even these distant monks in faith with the apostles.[285] While the ocean closed the monks of Iona off from some forms of global connectivity, this distance did not matter in Christ's global Church.[286]

The *Life of Columba* offered its readers an example of a Christian life integrated into the ocean environment of Iona, the Hebrides, and the insular world. In this environment St Columba became an Ocean-Christ, showing Iona's monks that despite being isolated and distant from the physical world that Christ touched, the ideal Christian life could be lived on the edge of world.[287] Following in the footsteps of St Columba, Iona's monks could see that they could also live a refracted version of Christ's teachings in their ocean islands. In the same way that Columba could see the whole orbit of the world in a single sunbeam, the monks of Iona could see Jerusalem and the life of Christ refracted in the ocean water that surrounded them.[288] An island in Scotland, the smallest *iota*, a speck amidst the 'long-haired sea', could

[284] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §§i.9, iii.3-4. On this see also, Amy C. Mulligan, *A Landscape of Words: Ireland, Britain and the Poetics of Space, 700–1250* (Manchester, 2019), pp. 26-8.
[285] Gal. 3:1-29.
[286] This alternative form of global history is discussed by Caroline Dodds Pennock and Amanda Power, 'Globalizing Cosmologies', *Past and Present*, 238, Supplement 13 (2018), pp. 88-115.
[287] David Jenkins, '*Imago Christi*? Adomnán's Use of Scripture and Place to Assert Columban Ecclesiastical Primacy', *Peritia*, 32 (2021), pp. 142-8; Matt. 8.27; O'Loughlin, 'Living in the Ocean', pp. 12-22; *VC*, §ii.42.
[288] *VC*, §i.43.

become a heavenly New Jerusalem.[289] It is unproductive to try and show how the distance between Iona and the centre of the medieval world could be bridged with the ocean. The ocean gave far greater meaning to the monks of Iona through its distancing effect. To explore this, the thesis now turns away from the physical and environmental role of the ocean, to investigate how the ocean was understood by the monks of Iona as an idea.

[289] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Tiugraind Beccáin* §4-5; Cormac Bourke, 'A Play on a Letter in Adomnán's *Life of Saint Columba*', *Innes Review*, 70:2 (2019), pp. 202-4; Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem "At the Ends of the Earth"', pp. 57-8, 73-8.

# CHAPTER THREE

## *The Ocean in Ionan Literature*

It is hard to define a corpus of 'Ionan Literature'. Stories in the *Life of Columba* show that the monks of Iona, and Columba himself, were often writing and reading, but to attribute any written work to the inhabitants of this supposedly key centre of book production is difficult.[1] It has even been suggested that Adomnán, who is our 'only visible [...] Ionan author' from its apex of influence, and supposed literary production, may not have written his *On the Holy Places* on Iona but at the court of King Aldfrith.[2] The *Life of Columba* is the text with the most evidence for being written on Iona itself. In it, Adomnán often wrote about Iona as if he were looking at its landscape and buildings, saying 'this island', 'this monastery', 'this church'.[3] The earliest extant manuscript of the *Life* was copied by Dorbéne, one of Adomnán's early successors as abbot, who was probably on Iona for his predecessor's death, linking the work closely to the island and its library.[4] While Columba's own books seem to have had an important ritual function on Iona during Adomnán's abbacy, no manuscript or text survives that can be firmly attributed to the saint.[5] Both medieval and modern scholars have claimed Columba's authorship for some surviving poems, but it is far easier on balance to assume these texts came from the broader *familia* of Columban monasteries who sought out the saint's authorial weight: the Ionan poem *Altus Prosator* is one such example.

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[1] *VC*, §§i.23, i.25, ii.8, ii.29, ii.44, ii.45, iii.5, iii.23. For the importance of these stories see O'Reilly, 'Reading the Scriptures in the Life of Columba', pp. 80-106.
[2] Woods, 'Adomnán's Composition of the *De Locis Sanctis*', pp. 193-204; Jane Stevenson, '*Altus Prosator*', *Celtica*, 23 (1999), pp. 364-5.
[3] *VC*, §§i.1, i.30, ii.28. ii.44, iii.19, iii.23.
[4] *VC*, §§iii.5, iii.23. On Dorbéne revealing the source material Adomnán had access to on Iona, see Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 24-5.
[5] *VC*, §§ii.44-5; *cf.* Herity and Breen, *The Cathach of Colum Cille*, pp. 1-6, 60.

Given that Ionan poems like the *Altus Prosator* are key sources for this chapter, they deserve some further discussion. The first attribution of *Altus Prosator* to Columba appeared in the prefatory material of the eleventh-century *Liber Hymnorum*, but many scholars have accepted this provenance.[6] Other poems discussed below have been gathered into an 'Ionan' collection because of similar references to Columba or Iona in these later prefaces.[7] Jane Stevenson has argued strongly against *Altus Prosator* being written by the hand of Columba, pointing out similarities with some meteorological ideas found in Isidore of Seville, along with stylistic characteristics that make it compatible with a later dating. She instead has attributed this poem to some other Ionan author working in the seventh century at the earliest.[8] Even this claim for authorship on Iona was based on very little evidence. Her argument largely stood on the similarities in style and language between the *Hisperica Famina* (a work of complex rhetoric seen as potentially Ionan),[9] the *Altus Prosator*, and the writings of Adomnán. Aldhelm's use of some similar language, and the possibility he was educated on Iona, was also used as evidence.[10] I am unconvinced that the *Hisperica Famina* was necessarily written by an Ionan monk or available on Iona. I think Stevenson's own earlier suggestion that the *Hisperica* had

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[6] *Preface to the Hymn Altus Prosator*, pp. 23-6. For those who see this as genuine poem of St Columba, see: Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 39-40; Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, pp. 263-5; Michael Curran, *The Antiphonary of Bangor and Early Irish Monastic Liturgy* (Blackrock, 1984), p. 199 n. 2; W.F. Bolton, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature, 597-1066* (Princeton NJ, 1967), p. 40.

[7] Both the prefaces to *Noli Pater* and to *Altus Prosator* also record traditions of these poems being composed at Derry: *Preface to the Hymn Noli Pater*, in *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, ed. and trans. Bernard and Atkinson, ii, p. 28; see above, n. 6. I follow Thomas Clancy and Gilbert Márkus in their classification of Ionan poetry: *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 39-40, 69-70, 86.

[8] Stevenson, '*Altus Prosator*', pp. 336-9, 352-5, 362-8. Her claims have been restated most recently by David Howlett who names the author as Virgilius Maro Grammaticus and repeats the place of composition as Iona: 'The "Altus Prosator" of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus', in Purcell *et al*. (eds.), *Clerics, Kings and Vikings*, pp. 387-8.

[9] For a concise introduction to the text, see Brian James Stone, *The Rhetorical Arts in Late Antique and Early Medieval Ireland* (Amsterdam, 2022), pp. 155-62; the critical edition is Michael Herren, *The Hisperica Famina: The A-text, a New Critical Edition with English Translation and Philological Commentary* (Toronto ON, 1974).

[10] Stevenson, 'Altus Prosator', pp. 363-8, see also Herren, *The Hisperica Famina: The A-text*, p. 37.

its origins in Bangor and that its style spread out from there across Ireland is convincing.[11] Adomnán may have spent much of his life away from the island of Iona and there is no record of where he was educated. While he is the most visible Ionan author, Adomnán's allusions and language may not speak to the exact style typical to the island's authors. Finally, Aldhelm's education on Iona (to say nothing of King Aldfrith of Northumbria's), is a claim with far less certainty than what is needed to associate all these key texts and authors with one location.[12] It is far safer to attribute the *Altus Prosator* to a Columban or Ionan milieu.

This attribution is also best applied to other Ionan poems. The preface of the *Amrae Coluimb Chille* was likely composed in the eleventh century. It claimed that the poem's supposed author, Dallán Forgaill, was a chief poet of Ireland who finished composing his verses shortly after Columba's death.[13] Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha has identified Dallán as a former royal member of the Dál Fiatach, who was perhaps a young contemporary of Columba living in the north of Ireland.[14] While the view that the poem and poet were contemporary to Columba has been accepted by many, recently the early dating of this text has come under criticism by Jacopo Bisagni. He identified some features in the poem that led him to a ninth-century date for the work, written, he suggested, in proximity to Durrow.[15] T.M. Charles-Edwards has challenged Bisagni, preferring a compromise: the version of

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[11] Jane Stevenson, 'Bangor and the *Hisperica Famina*', *Peritia*, 6-7 (1987-88), pp. 211-13.
[12] Compare Ireland, 'Where Was King Aldfrith of Northumbria Educated?' pp. 48-52, and Michael Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 36 (2007), pp. 45-8.
[13] Stokes, 'The Bodleian *Amra Choluimb Chille*', pp. 133-5. The key work dating this preface to the beginning of the eleventh century is Herbert, 'The Preface to the *Amra Coluim Cille*', pp. 71-3.
[14] Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Beginnings of Irish Vernacular Literary Tradition', *Settimane*, 57 (2010), pp. 566-73. However, no evidence was produced by Ní Dhonnchadha to tie this monk to the *Amrae* itself. This association may be fabricated later: Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, pp. 79 n. 228, 205-9.
[15] Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, pp. 77-81, 145-7, 156-7, 199-231. The previous major editors of the *Amrae Coluimb Chille* preferred an early dating of the poem and the attribution to Dallán: Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 97-100. For a concise summary of the debate on the composition of this poem, see Charles-Edwards, 'Jacopo Bisagni's *Amrae Coluimb Chille*', pp. 266-8.

the *Amrae Coluimb Chille* passed down to the present, while based on a ninth-century recension, had its roots in the immediate aftermath of Columba's death as the poem claims.[16] The place of composition remains unresolved, but the author clearly had intimate knowledge of the cult and rituals that surrounded Columba's grave on Iona, as well as the saint's achievements.[17] This is another key poem that is linked to Iona and its community but cannot be claimed as a product of the monastery's scriptorium or monks.

Something similar can be said of the poet Beccán mac Luigdech, an author of two poems in the Ionan canon: the *Fo Réir Choluimb* and the *Tiugraind Beccáin* (*To-fed andes*).[18] There are multiple theories as to who this Beccán might have been. The authors of the *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae* called him Beccán of Tech Conaill, a monastery in modern Churchtown, near Powerscourt Co. Wicklow. The text also claimed that he was a member of the Uí Néill, so kin with St Columba, although of the Cenél nEógain branch rather than Columba's Cenél Connaill.[19] Beccán has otherwise been identified as Beccán the Hermit, *Beccanus solitarius*, one of the addressees of Cummian's *On the Paschal Controversy* along with the abbot

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[16] *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §i.1-19; Charles-Edwards, 'Bisagni's *Amrae Coluimb Chille*', p. 287. This compromise was first made by James Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, p. 427, and was the original stance taken by Bisagni himself, 'The Language and the Date of *Amrae Coluimb Cille*', in Stefan Zimmer (ed.), *Kelten am Rhein: Akten des Dreizehnten Internationalen Keltologiekongress, 23. bis 27. Juli 2007 in Bonn* (2 vols, Mainz, 2009) ii, pp. 1-11.

[17] Note especially *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §§vii.18-19; Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 93-4.

[18] The *Fo Réir Choluimb* is attributed to Beccán in a gloss to the twenty-fourth verse, while the *Tiugraind Beccáin* is attributed to him in the manuscript heading: Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, p. 129, nn. 2-3; Fergus Kelly, 'A Poem in Praise of Columb Cille', *Éiru*, 24 (1973), pp. 2-3. *Fo Réir Choluimb* is alternatively attributed to Dallán Forgaill, the author of the *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, by its manuscript heading, but Kelly has demonstrated closer linguistic similarities between the poems of Beccán than with the *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, and he has shown the glossarial ascription to be earlier than the titular attribution to Dallán: Kelly, '*Tiughraind Bhécáin*', pp. 73-9.

[19] Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 129-31; *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin, 1985), §32, n. f. The glossary to *Fo Réir Choluimb* states that Beccán was of the Cenél Conaill and thus direct kin with Columba. However, Kelly saw this as a mistake by the glossator who may have confused his kin with his monastic attachment to Tech Conaill; or perhaps the glossator was making an interpretation based on the poem's brotherly language: 'A Poem in Praise of Columb Cille', §§24 n. 1, pp. 2-3.

Ségéne of Iona.[20] This would create a secure connection between these poems and the island of Iona, making Beccán a key figure in the Columban *familia*'s leadership network.[21] Yet a third possibility arises with Beccán of Rum, an inhabitant of another Hebridean Isle, whose death the *Iona Chronicle* recorded for AD 677.[22] Thomas Clancy and Gilbert Márkus have speculated that all three of these Beccáns were in fact the same person.[23] The poems are filled with oceanic images that would reflect someone deeply in tune with the Hebridean seascape of either Iona or Rum.[24] While Beccán's residence on Iona cannot be confirmed, the ocean imagery in his poetry may speak to something characteristic about the Columban *familia*'s writing: the absence of any evidence for inhabiting Iona did not mean that these poets could not speak to the environment of Iona, and the importance the ocean had for the greater Ionan community.

John Bannerman has argued that the frequent appearance of maritime concerns in the Irish annals signalled that an early chronicle was kept on Iona.[25] In a similar way, the presence of ocean imagery and themes in poems attributed to monks from Iona's *familia* unite the literary corpus studied in this chapter. The ocean imagery in the poetry of Beccán mac Luigdech features the voyage of Columba from Ireland to Britain prominently as an example of his holiness:

> He crossed the waved fierce sweep, maned, seal-filled,
> boiling, bounding, seething, white-tipped, joyful, doleful.[26]

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[20] Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 131-2; Cummian, *De Controversia Paschali*, ll. 1-2; Walsh and Ó Cróinín, *Cummian's Letter*, pp. 8-15
[21] See the recent study on the addressees of Cummian's letter, including Beccán, by Patrick McAlary, 'Contention after Mag Léne', pp. 121-2.
[22] *AU*, §677.6; Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, p. 133.
[23] Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 129-34
[24] Beccán Mac Luigdech, *Fo Réir Choluimb*, §§2, 12-14, 16; *id.*, *Tiugraind Beccáin*, §§4-5, 9, 19; Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 130-1.
[25] Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 9-26
[26] Beccán Mac Luigdech, *Tiugraind Beccáin*, §5; see below, n. 36. See also Beccán mac Luigdech, *Fo Réir Choluimb*, §2.

After all, the ocean was crucial to the story of Columba's sainthood. It was his journey into the sea, never to see Ireland again, that became iconic in later legends.[27] Even if the Ionan poems were not written by monks living on Iona, if they wrote about the life and cult of Columba, they had to engage with the ocean. Certainly the *Amrae Coluimb Chille* not only referenced the saint's ocean pilgrimage, but also the ritual practices on Iona that facilitated safe and quick sea voyages.[28] Safe and unsafe voyages were certainly on the mind of the Ionan poet of *Adiutor Laborantium*, a poem written from the viewpoint of a monk rowing through an ocean storm.[29] The ocean also linked authors of the Columban *familia* to the mother house that led their federation. They would have used these ocean highways to spend time on Iona as visitors or pilgrims. To be part of the Ionan *familia* mandated some use of the sea and an engagement with the Hebridean landscape of Iona. Many stories of monks, laypeople, and saints making the pilgrimage to Iona can be seen in Adomnán's *Life*.[30] These pilgrimages could even be indirect: if a monk in one of the *familia*'s Irish monasteries could not travel to Iona, they could conduct imagined pilgrimages across the sea. A story in the *Life of Columba* recounted how a young monk meditated on making the journey to Iona long before he ever set sail.[31] Much like Iona's annalistic record keeping, a keen interest in the sea is common across the corpus of Ionan poetry and acts as a kind of typology for the canon. These poems are valuable in understanding the wider appreciation the Ionan *familia* had for the ocean environment of Iona, because of this shared interest, because of how the ocean

[27] Ó Domhnaill, *Betha Colaim Chille*, §174.
[28] *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §vii.18-19; *VC*, §ii.45.
[29] *Adiutor Laborantium*, ll. 16-20. *Adiutor Laborantium* may have even been written by Adomnán who used the ocean highways of Iona often: Gilbert Márkus, '*Adiutor Laborantium* – A Poem by Adomnán?', Wooding *et al*. (eds.), *Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, pp. 145-61.
[30] *VC*, §§i.4, i.5, i.16, i.25-7, i.30, i.32, i.44, ii.39.
[31] *VC*, §§i.2; see also the vision of Lugaid mac Tailchain (iii.23)

linked these communities together, and because the ocean was a crucial part of their shared identity.

This poetry and the writings of Adomnán are the texts this chapter focuses on to understand the role of the ocean in Ionan writing. It discusses these works in dialogue with the potential literary influences felt by the *familia*. Extensive work has been done trying to rebuild the library available to Iona's monks, and this serves as a tool to narrow down the texts that impacted Iona.[32] The following chapter is consequently split into a series of sections focusing on these influences: first, looking at the effect of classical literature on Iona's view of the ocean; second, that of the biblical texts; third, the patristic and late antique influences; then finally turning to early Irish texts that are useful in dialogue with Iona's depictions of the ocean. This chapter concludes with a synthesis of these potential influences and unpicks what the literature tells us about how Ionan monks viewed and understood the ocean.

## Classical Literature

> [T]here's a tale that the whole world's
> Heard, even someone in some remote land where the breakers of Ocean's
> Far side crash, or who lives in a southern zone, beyond sunlight's
> Central and hottest of sky's five zones, in complete isolation.
> Out of that primal flood, men borne over so many vast seas
> Ask, for our fathers' gods, just a tiny home, just a harmless
> Haven, and water and air, which are nobody's private possessions.[33]

Facing 'the breakers of Ocean's far side crash', many in Britain and Ireland had indeed heard the story of Aeneas and the exiled Trojans. The *Aeneid* was preserved and read throughout early medieval Europe; insular scholars such as Bede

[32] Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 211-22; Gertrud Brüning, 'Adamnan's *Vita Columbae*, und Ihre Ableitungen', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, 11 (1917), pp. 213-304; O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, pp. 246-9; O'Loughlin, 'The Library of Iona', pp. 33-52.
[33] Vergil, *Aeneid*, trans. Frederick Ahl and Elaine Fatham (Oxford, 2007), §§7.223-31.

and Aldhelm quoted the work often.[34] It is possible that it was kept in the library of Iona too and was read by Adomnán when writing the *Life of Columba*.[35] The monks of Columba's *familia*, especially those living on Iona, would have empathised with Aeneas and his banished sailors, seeing commonalities between them and their monastic founder or even themselves. This is best seen in the poetry of Iona's *familia* where exile on the sea appears as a recurring image:

> 4. Connacht's candle, Britain's candle, marvellous master;
> in scores of currachs with a wretched army he crossed the long-haired [sea].
>
> 5. He crossed the waved fierce sweep, maned, seal-filled,
> boiling, bounding, seething, white-tipped, joyful, doleful. [...]
>
> 19. He forsook chariots, he loved boats, foe to falsehood;
> sun-like exile, by sail he quit famous bonds.[36]

This ocean exile was undertaken voluntarily by Columba, and it would have been an experience common to many of Iona's monks who had left their homeland.[37] *Peregrinatio*, ascetic exile across the sea, was undertaken by other famous Irish monks like St Columbanus.[38] For Aeneas, the sea was the first obstacle terrorising the fleeing Trojans, leaving abandoned swimmers, planks, gear, and treasure strewn

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[34] Sinéad O'Sullivan, 'From Troy to Aachen: Ancient Rome and the Carolingian Reception of Vergil', in Rosalind Brown-Grant *et al*. (eds.), *Inscribing Knowledge in the Medieval Book: the Power of Paratexts* (Berlin, 2019), pp. 185-96; M. Geymonat, 'The Transmission of Virgil's Works in Antiquity and the Middle Ages', trans. Nicholas Horsfall, in Nicholas Horsfall (ed.), *A Companion to the Study of Vergil* (Leiden, 1995), pp. 308-12; Rijcklof Henri Frans Hofman, 'Some New Facts Concerning the Knowledge of Vergil in Early Medieval Ireland', *Études Celtiques*, 25 (1988), pp. 189-212.

[35] Brüning, 'Adamnan's *Vita Columbae*', pp. 241-2; O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, pp. 246-9.

[36] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Tiugraind Beccáin*:

> 4. *Caindel Connacht, caindel Alban, amrae fiadat,*
> *fichtib curach cechaing trichait troich[-ch]ét ciabat.*
> 5. *Cechaing tonnaig, tresaig magain, mongaig, rónaig,*
> *roluind, mbedcaig, mbruichrich, mbarrfind, failid, mbrónaig. [...]*
> 19. *Lécciss cairptiu, carais noä, námae guë,*
> *gríandae loingsech, lécciss la séol [seimann cluë.]*

[37] The story of Saint Fintén, which opens the first book of Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, revealed this dynamic from the off: *VC*, §i.2.

[38] Elva Johnston, 'Exiles from the Edge? The Irish Contexts of *Peregrinatio*', in Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder (eds.), *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture and Religion* (London, 2016), pp. 38-41; Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, §§i.3-4.

in the waves.[39] The drama of Aeneas's voyage is something also captured in the depictions of St Columba's own exile to Iona on the 'boiling, bounding, seething, white-tipped' sea in the Columban poetry. The depiction of storm-tossed sailors seeking a new home in the *Aeneid* would have also been a useful model for Beccán mac Luigdech as he mythologised the voyage of Iona's patron saint into the sea.[40]

As recently argued by Lindy Brady, part of the *Aeneid*'s medieval popularity was its usefulness in providing a mythmaking model, including for the origin legends of the Irish and Britons.[41] One of the most important elements adopted consistently was Aeneas's seabound exile. The earliest source for the British origin legend is from the ninth century, but some have speculated it circulated in the seventh, or even earlier, during the Roman occupation of Britain.[42] The myth was that Aeneas's nephew Brutus came as an exile to Britain after slaying his father: the Britons are his descendants.[43] The authors of this legend saw kin-slaying as a crime punishable with ocean exile.[44] In the Irish tradition wave-bound exile, 'sending adrift', was such a sentence for serious crimes including kin-slaying, and had a notable place in laws written by Ionan scholars.[45] Later legends even suggested that the reason for St Columba's *peregrinatio* to Iona was because of his involvement in

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[39] Vergil, *Aeneid*, §§i.118-19.
[40] It has been argued that Aeneas's voyage was also the model for the earliest Irish *immrama*, which Ionan authors may have drawn upon for their own sea-tales: Heinrich Zimmer, 'Keltische Beiträge. II. Brendans Meerfahrt', *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und Deutsche Literatur*, 33 (1889), pp. 328-31; *cf*. William Flint Thrall, 'Virgil's *Aeneid* and the Irish *Imrama*: Zimmer's Theory', *Modern Philology*, 15:8 (1917), pp. 449-74; and David Dumville, '*Echtrae* and *Immram*: Some Problems of Definition', *Ériu*, 27 (1976), p. 76.
[41] Lindy Brady, *The Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2022), pp. 64-5.
[42] Helen Fulton, 'Historiography and the Invention of British Identity: Troy as an Origin Legend in Medieval Britain and Ireland', in Lindy Brady and Patrick Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (Leiden, 2022), p. 340; John Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 137-43.
[43] *Historia Brittonum*, ed. and trans. John Morris, *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals* (London, 1980), §§7, 10.
[44] Brady, *Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland*, pp. 108-9, 119-21.
[45] *Ibid*., pp. 108-9; *Cáin Adomnáin*, §45; Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988), pp. 219-21.

the battle of Cúl Dreimne, fought between the southern and northern branches of the Uí Néill: perhaps he felt that he was a kin-slayer.[46]

The quotation from the *Aeneid* that opened this section also reveals the classical perception that equated ocean geography with peripherality: both physical and metaphorical. For the Romans and the Greeks this peripherality was in stark contrast to their civilisations, built on the shores of the Mediterranean but coming to dominate the outer regions.[47] In Pliny's *Natural History*, which Adomnán used as a source for his *On the Holy Places*,[48] the ocean is described as the 'extreme outside' border to the known and civilised world.[49] This view was adopted in the *Life of Columba* where Adomnán felt that the ocean was likewise 'about' the 'whole circle of the earth', and that Iona was but one 'small and remote island' in that ocean.[50] Pliny spent time highlighting the tidal and geographic characteristics of the ocean that differentiated it from the Mediterranean, something that fascinated other classical geographers like Strabo.[51] Beyond this however, the ocean had a prominent place in the *Natural History* because of the strange creatures it contained.[52] Pliny recorded in one chapter that over three hundred monsters of 'marvellous variety and size' washed up on the shore of Gaul.[53] Other chapters told stories about Giant Squid, Sperm Whales, Tritons, and Nereids.[54] The last of these was shaped like a

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[46] See above, Introduction, pp. 6-7.
[47] Claude Nicolet, *Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire*, trans. Hélène Leclerc (Ann Arbor, 1991), pp. 29-47; Diarmuid Scully, 'The Third Voyage of Cormac in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*: Analogues and Context', in Alastair Minnis and Jane Roberts (eds.), *Text, Image, Interpretation: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature and its Insular Context in Honour of Éamonn Ó Carragáin* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 211-19.
[48] Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, §ii.19; O'Loughlin, 'The Library of Iona', p. 45.
[49] Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, ed. and trans. Harris Rackham, W.H.S. Jones, and D.E. Eichholz (10 vols, Cambridge MA, 1938-1962), i, §2.164.
[50] *VC*, §§i.43, iii.23.
[51] Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, §2.217; Strabo, *Geographica*, §3.3.
[52] Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, §§2.217, 9.8.
[53] *Ibid.*, §ix.14.
[54] Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, §§ix.8-13

man and would climb aboard boats at night and sink them.[55] According to Pliny, all of these frightening beings could be found in the Atlantic surroundings of Iona.

Classical authors not only saw the ocean as peripheral, and full of strange beasts and monsters, they also believed that this strangeness came to be affect the people living in that environment.[56] Strabo saw the inhabitants of Britain as physically twisted, their environmental surroundings and peripheral place in the world made their manners and customs barbaric and primitive.[57] The Irish were portrayed as even more savage, probably because they were farther away from the Mediterranean core, and lived on smaller islands more affected by the ocean.[58] Pliny thought those who live in such 'empty voids' of the ocean should be grateful that Rome extended its power over much of Britain because it saved the inhabitants from the barbaric practices innate to such environments.[59] This was also a perspective that evolved with the growth of Christianity and its institutionalisation in the Roman Empire and would have still been recognised by those in the early medieval period too.[60] Insular contemporaries of Iona's monks seem to have adopted this classical belief that the barbarity or isolation of one's physical environment, the 'savage ocean', made the inhabitants ignorant too. Cummian, in his letter *On the Paschal Controversy*, called the monks and abbots of the Ionan *familia* 'a small part of the Britons and Irish who are nearly at the earth's edge and […] pimples on the face of the earth'.[61] St Wilfrid, as recorded by Bede, derided the monks of Iona, but seemingly also the inhabitants of the British Isles more broadly. These were

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[55] *Ibid*.
[56] Fabienne Michelet, 'Centrality, Marginality and Distance: Britain's Changing Location on the Map of the World', *Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature*, 17 (2005), pp. 51-2.
[57] Strabo, *Geographica*, §§2.5.8, 4.5.2.
[58] *Ibid*., §4.5.4.
[59] Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, §30.13.
[60] See below, pp. 170-6.
[61] Cummian, *De Controversia Paschali*, ll. 109-10: *Britonum Scottorumque particula, qui sunt pene extremi et, ut ita dicam, mentagrae orbis terrarum*.

Christians who "'in their rude simplicity'", "'from these two remotest islands of the Ocean, […] foolishly toil fighting against the whole world'".[62]

Stories in the *Life of Columba*, like when Berach and Baithéne confronted a sea monster, or when Cormac and his sailors were attacked by sharp-nosed beasts the size of frogs, show that Pliny's terror and wonder towards the strange and wild ocean was shared by the monks of Iona.[63] Even the stories of Columba battling the magic and belief of pagan wizards in Pictland arguably carried on the classical view that peripheral environments begot peripheral practice.[64] Yet neither Adomnán nor Iona's monks belittled their own achievements, practices, or culture despite their ocean environment and peripherality. Iona's monks defended their traditions against those classically-tinged arguments used by Wilfrid and Cummian.[65] When writing his *On the Holy Places*, Adomnán did not bemoan his distance from the Mediterranean world in the same explicit manner as Bede did when citing the Irishman in his *Ecclesiastical History*.[66] Any implicit hint of Ionan monks despairing at their ocean peripherality was matched by a system of meaning that this distance generated.[67] Columba, his monks, and his abbatial successors clearly saw and understood the ocean as a peripheral environment, but they set out voluntarily into the Atlantic. Rather than 'recentring' world around themselves, the literature of Iona's monks

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[62] *HE*, §iii.25: '*quibus de duabus ultimus Oceani insulis, et his non totis, contra totum orbum stulto labore pugnant'* […] *'qui simplicitate rustica*'.
[63] *VC*, §§i.19, ii.42.
[64] *VC*, §§i.37, ii.11, ii.32-4; the story of Silnán offers the possibility of Irish magi too, but it is more likely that mainly Pictish examples are recorded, §ii.17.
[65] *HE* §iii.25. Columbanus similarly felt that it was his duty to correct the centre of the Christian universe and defend insular practice: *Epistulae*, §v.3: *nullus hereticus, nullus Iudeaus, nullus schismaticus fuit*; Damian Bracken, 'Juniors Teaching Elders, Columbanus, Rome and Spiritual Authority', in Éamonn Ó Carragáin and Carol Neuman de Vegvar (eds.), *Roma Felix – Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 262-75.
[66] *HE*, §v.15; see also, Bede, *In Cantica Canticorum*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119B (Turnhout, 1983), §prol. ll. 508-13. On this sense of isolation, but so too Bede's optimistic vision of the British Isles, see Diarmuid Scully, 'Location and Occupation: Bede, Gildas, and the Roman Vision of Britain', in Jane Roberts and Leslie Webster (eds.), *Anglo-Saxon Traces* (Tempe AZ, 2011), pp. 243-72.
[67] See also above, Chapter Two, pp. 137-40.

seems to embrace and recognise the peripheral place that they found themselves in.[68] They valued their place on the edge of the world, and while the classical perception of the ocean may have been influential, the community of Iona did not subscribe completely to those biases. Instead, a crucial way to understand how Iona received the classical understanding of the ocean is to consider how they reinterpreted some of its fundamental suppositions.

Beccán mac Luigdech highlighted that one purpose of Columba setting out into voluntary ocean exile was to leave behind the heroic trappings of secular success:

> 19. He forsook chariots, he loved boats, foe to falsehood;
> sun-like exile, by sail he quit famous bonds.[69]

Compare this with Aeneas who, in the midst of a sea-storm, lamented that he did not die by the hand of Achilles or the Greeks, but instead would die unheroically by drowning away from his homeland:

> All signs menace the men with immediate death and destruction.
> Now, in a flash, shivers send all Aeneas's limbs into spasm.
> Groaning aloud, he extends both palms, reaches upwards to heaven
> Uttering these cries: 'Greater by three, even four times, the blessing
> Chance gave those with the fortune to die beneath Troy's mighty ramparts
> Under their fathers's gaze! O Tydeus's son, Diomedes,
> Bravest Danaän of all, why could *I* [sic] not have fallen on Ilium's
> Plains, spilled forth my soul under *your* [sic] right hand? That's where savage
> Hector was killed by Achilles's spear'.[70]

The Irish had a similar understanding of what a heroic life and death should look like, where by riding chariots, raiding, and warfare, and certainly not by sailing away

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[68] *Cf.* Fabienne Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 157-60, 273-4.
[69] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Tiugraind Beccáin*, §19.
[70] Vergil, *Aeneid*, §i.30-32, 91-101.

from home, one could attain fame throughout Ireland and in one's kindred.[71] An exile lost all their familial ties and any social status in a society where those were fundamental to one's identity and chances at worldly success.[72] Adomnán suggested that some of these ocean exiles were a polluting influence on the land itself. A man of the Uí Thuirtri who committed fratricide and incest, crimes punishable by ocean wandering, sought absolution and penance from Columba on Iona. Yet Columba refused that he even set foot on the island, demanding he instead be dropped on Mull.[73] To be a voluntary ocean exile was to put oneself in a shameful position in Irish society, and to associate with the most appalling crimes. Whereas Aeneas bemoaned the sea's dangers and lamented his exile from a home where he could have died a hero, Columba set out into the ocean precisely seeking that 'boiling, bounding, seething, white-tipped' environment, with full knowledge of the legal and social background that such a journey referenced.

The literature of Iona's *familia* clearly felt the influence of the classical understanding of the ocean and the sea: St Columba's exile was 'sun-like' because of its retreat into the ocean, an image also used in the writings of Vergil: 'in the winter the sun so hurries to dive in the Ocean'.[74] Yet the literature and thought of Iona also reinterpreted these classical understandings of the ocean. This reinterpretation can be seen as part of the broader Christian reprogramming of classical expectations. Christ

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[71] The *Audacht Morainn* sees the ideal king as one who matches these characteristics (§§15, 59-60), even if that ideal king did need to go into exile in order to return and bring order (§1). It should be noted however, that the behaviour of kings probably did not differ much from that of powerful Irish abbots: Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish Hermit Poetry?', in Ó Corráin, Breatnach, and McCone (eds.), *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*, pp. 261-2.
[72] Johnston, 'Exiles from the Edge?', pp. 42-4; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Social Background to Irish *Peregrinatio*', *Celtica*, 11 (1976), pp. 43-59; repr. in Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage*, pp. 94-108, from which all references are taken, pp. 99-102. This understanding of exile was common to other insular cultures and their literature: Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 84-8.
[73] *VC*, §i.22.
[74] Vergil, *Aeneid*, §i.745.

is humiliated on the cross: His betrayal, suffering, and death are His pathway to heroism. Christ preached weakness, not strength; renunciation, humility, and poverty, not glory and riches. It is a wider hagiographical trope to mimic Christ's passion by rejecting the honours, fame, and profit that came with the secular world, instead pursuing ascetic purity.[75] Ionan literature took this Christian reprogramming and connected it directly with Columba and Iona's relationship with the ocean. Beccán mac Luigdech's poem equated Columba's ocean voyage directly to Christ's passion:

> It was not on cushioned beds
> he undertook complex prayers:
> he crucified – not for crimes –
> his body upon the blue waves.[76]

The close association between Columba's exile, his life on Iona, and the crucifixion of Christ is repeated elsewhere in the Ionan poetry:

> The clever seer sought the way of the four:
> He went with two songs to heaven-land after his crucifixion.[77]

also,

> He crucified his body, freed its fair sides of gentleness,
> he chose knowledge, chose slabs, forsook bedding.[78]

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[75] In terms of rejecting wealth and social status in favour of ascetic purity and poverty, see Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, ed. Archibald Robertson, trans. H. Ellershaw, *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, NPNF2 4 (Buffalo NY, 1892), §§1-3; for rejecting military prestige, see Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, ed. and trans. Jacques Fontaine, *Sulpice Sévère: Vie de Saint Martin*, SC 133-135 (1967-1969), §§1-4; *id*., trans. Alexander Roberts, *The Works of Sulpitius Severus*, NPNF2 11 (New York NY, 1894), §§1-4; and, for how such renunciation brought social power, Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man', pp. 91-5.

[76] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Fo Réir Choluimb*, §2:
> *Níbu fri coilchthi tincha*
> *tindscan ernaigdi cassa,*
> *crochais – níbu hi cinta –*
> *a chorp for tonna glassa.*

[77] *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §§vii.1-2:
> *Ergnaid suí siächt slicht cethruir:*
> *cota-lluid la dochétal do nimíath íarna chroich*.

*Cf*. Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, p. 245, n. vii.2; Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, pp. 275, 346-8; below, Chapter Four, pp. 222-4. See also, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §§viii.16-17, ix.2

[78] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Tiugraind Beccáin*, §16:
> *Colainn crochsus, scuirsius for foil finda tóeba,*
> *to-gó dánu, dénis lecca, lécciss cróeba*.

This was because Columba's ocean exile, as seen in the other verses of Beccán, was the ultimate renunciation of family, 'Níall's candle'; of home, 'He renounced Ireland'; of glory, 'He forsook chariots, […] he quit famous bonds'; and of wealth 'he freed his monks from possessions'.[79]

Columba's example and mission, his crucifixion 'on the blue waves', inspired his monks in their own practice. By leaving their homes for Iona, these monks followed in the footsteps of Columba and humbled themselves in the shame of ocean exile: taking on the punishments for the most severe penitents and becoming a 'wretched army'.[80] This was not an army of Trojans who would go on to found the greatest empire in the world, but a group of monks searching for a greater, heavenly kingdom. While scholars have translated these 'waves' as 'grey' or 'green',[81] the Irish *glas* could also mean 'blue',[82] and was interpreted as such by Clare Stancliffe in discussing the practice of 'blue martyrdom'.[83] She has suggested that rather than a 'red martyrdom' (death for the faith), or a 'white martyrdom' (a bloodless martyrdom of piety), lay-sinners could obtain a 'blue martyrdom' by undergoing penitential practices such as ocean exile.[84] Stancliffe did raise the obvious issue with this model: it allowed penitents who had committed serious crimes to achieve a level of holiness shared with the martyrs and confessor saints.

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[79] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Fo Réir Choluimb*, §§5, 12, 14; *id*., *Tiugraind Beccáin*, §19.
[80] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Tiugraind Beccáin*, §4; Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, p. 251, n. 22. For other references to Columba's monks following him into the ocean and thus gaining holiness, see Beccán mac Luigdech, *Fo Réir Choluimb*, §§5, 14-18.
[81] Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, p. 137; Kelly, 'A Poem in Praise of Coluimb Cille', p. 9.
[82] 'glas', *eDIL: An Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language* (2019), https://dil.ie/25996 (2 May 2025).
[83] Clare Stancliffe, 'Red, White and Blue Martyrdom', in Whitelock, McKitterick, and Dumville (eds.), *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, pp. 28-9, 38-44.
[84] Stancliffe, 'Red, White and Blue Martyrdom', pp. 29-35, 40-4. This was a continuation in the progress of adapting martyrdom to a post-persecution environment as articulated early on in Athanasius's *Vita Antonii*, §§2, 46-7; also by Sulpicius Severus, *Epistulae*, trans. Roberts, *The Works of Sulpitius Severus*, NPNF2 11, §2.

The alternative interpretation is that these were penitents who had not committed any sins, but sought out penitential punishments voluntarily.[85] I suggest that it was this voluntary penitential martyrdom on the waves that Beccán mac Luigdech and Iona's monks envisaged for themselves.[86] This was an ascetic roadmap laid out by Columba for his followers, showing how the seascape was the means of mimicking the passion of Christ.[87] The 'blue waves' became a means of embodying the image of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

To sail into the dangerous and wild border regions of the world was the point for Columba and his monastic community. While the classical perceptions of the ocean as peripheral and dangerous did seem to influence Iona's *familia*, it was by reprogramming those views and seeing a personal passion in confronting the savage ocean that they found meaning. The drama of Aeneas's ocean voyage may have provided some of the language for Iona's poets to mythologise Columba's voyage, but it was very Christian ideas, focused on the ocean and its ascetic meaning, that were more important to the Ionan monks.

Biblical Texts

> The earth was empty and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters.[88]

At the beginning of biblical time, the deep covered the earth. This was the primordial environment that God ordered in His next stages of creation.[89] It was on

[85] Stancliffe, 'Red, White and Blue Martyrdom', pp. 43-4.
[86] Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 157-8.
[87] The importance of Christ crucified, symbolic of ascetic perfection in the insular world, has been discussed by Michael Herren and Shirley Ann Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 257-8.
[88] Gen. 1:2.
[89] The motif of God ordering the waters has been discussed in depth. One recent work is Paul K.-K. Cho, *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 67-87. For a summary

the third day of creation that God drew back the ocean to expose dry land naming both the 'Land' and the 'Sea(s)'.[90] God followed this by filling the ocean with 'the large sea-monsters'.[91] These passages were foundational to the Ionan understanding of the ocean despite the Latin noun *oceanus* not appearing in the Vulgate. The poetry and the literature of the Columban *familia* was deeply interested in the tension between the ocean as ordered in creation, and the ocean as the embodiment of primordial chaos, the home of monsters. This was a key focus of the poem *Altus Prosator*:

> I. Clouds bear winter rain out of the deep's fountains, [...]
> to do good to the crops, vines, and buds; [...]
>
> K. Behold, giants are shown to groan in great pain beneath the waters,
> to be engulfed in flame and torment,
> and drown by the swelling whirlpools of Cocytus, [...]

and,

> M. By the heavenly powers of the great God is hung
> the globe of the earth, and the belt of the great abyss around it, [...]
>
> N. It seems doubtful to no one that hell is down below
> Where darkness, worms, and terrible animals are held[92]

'Nature was a text whose accurate interpretation uncovered religious truths', it told the reader 'something about God': the interest in the water cycle in this poem, how the deep ocean simultaneously provided for crops while containing giants, darkness,

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of recent scholarly developments, see Rebecca Watson, 'The Sea and Ecology', in Hilary Marlow and Mark Harris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology* (Oxford, 2022), pp. 324-35.

[90] Gen. 1:9-10.

[91] Gen. 1:21.

[92] *Altus Prosator*, ed. and trans. Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*:

> I. *Invehunt nubes pontias ex fontibus brumalias* [...]
> *Profuturas segitibus vineis et germinibus* [...].
> K. *ecce gigantes gemere sub aquis mago ulcere*
> *comprobantur incendio aduri ac supplicio*
> *Cocytique Charybdibus strangulati turgentibus* [...].
> M. *Magni Dei virtutibus appenditur dialibus*
> *globus terrae et circulus abyssi magnae inditus* [...].
> N. *Nulli videtur dubium in imis esse infernum*
> *ubi habentur Tenebrae vermes et dirae bestiae* [...].

Clancy and Márkus (*Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, p. 60) interpret these images as drawing on biblical descriptions of creation: Job 26:7, Prov. 8:27-29.

and terror, said something about God's sublime power.[93] Likewise in the *Life of Columba*, the ocean was as a dangerous chaotic environment despite it being ordered by God. The ocean creature that terrified the Ionan monk Berach was a one of those *cete grandia* placed in the sea by God at the beginning of time, so was the sea monster in the ocean mouth of Loch Ness.[94] Adomnán stressed, however, that God ordered both these sea-monsters and the ocean.[95]

The most terrifying warning from the Bible of what beasts lurked in the ocean refers to Leviathan. 'Angels will fear' the great sea beast that lurks in the ocean, which he makes 'boil' as if 'aged': a potential representation of the real ocean chaos of waves churning with sea foam.[96] In the Ionan writings the ocean is similarly 'long-haired', 'seething', and 'white-tipped', but such characteristics were also caused by surfacing sea-beasts where the sea wash might look similar to the froth-tipped waves of tidal overfalls.[97] While God restrained Leviathan and the ocean from reclaiming the earth, the monster roamed the ocean 'at his pleasure' and ships might encounter this frightening beast.[98] In the imagination of both insular and patristic authors the ocean was the home of Leviathan, the same serpent that tempted Eve, and it could be encountered even by saintly sailors.[99] *Altus Prosator* connects the 'great Dragon, most loathsome, terrible and ancient', dragged 'into the abyss', with the fashioning of the 'sea and waters' by God in the subsequent stanza.[100] It has been

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[93] Squatriti, *Water and Society in Early Medieval Italy*, p. 162; *cf.* Columbanus, *Instructiones*, ed. trans. Walker, *Opera*, §§i.4-5.
[94] *VC*, §§i.19, ii.27: while only the creature that attacks Berach is described as a *cetus magnus*, both are *beluae*.
[95] *VC*, §§i.4, i.19.
[96] Job 41:16, 41:22-3.
[97] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Tiugraind Beccáin*, §4-5; *VC*, §i.19. See above, Chapter Two, pp. 98-9.
[98] Job 41:1; Ps. 104:25-26; Rev. 20:1-3, 20:7.
[99] *Navigatio S. Brendani*, §§24-5; Jerome, *Tractatus LIX in Psalmos*, ed. Germain Morin, CCSL 78 (1958), Ps. 103:26; *id*., trans. Marie Liguori Ewald, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, FC 48, 57 (Washington DC, 1964, 1966), 48, §30 (p. 228).
[100] *Altus Prosator*, §§D, E.

suggested that when Cormac Ua Liatháin made his third voyage into the ocean 'which seemed beyond the range of human exploration, and from where no one could return', he encountered these lands inhabited by Leviathan, what Jacqueline Borsje has called an 'infernal environment'.[101] Certainly the watery 'hell' filled with 'worms and terrible animals' of the *Altus Prosator* seems similar to the ocean of Cormac, where he and his monks were surrounded by 'fearful terrors' and 'little creatures' 'about the size of frogs'.[102] That this region could be encountered by a Columban sailor was perhaps God's intention.[103]

God's willingness for humanity to encounter the terrors of the ocean appeared in one significant episode of the *Life of Columba* where St Colmán moccu Sailni was caught in the whirlpool of Corryvreckan.

> 'The Lord terrifies him in this way, not so that the boat in which he sits may be shipwrecked in the waves, but rather that he should be roused to more fervent prayer, so, with God's favour, he may reach us after passing through the danger'.[104]

Of course, Colmán did not seem to be aware that this was just God testing him, so while the ocean could be the home of chaotic terror, it was also an instrument of God's instruction and punishment. God often used the natural world in this way, most relevantly in the story of Jonah: having been called by God to preach to the city of Nineve of their impending destruction, Jonah instead chose to flee across the sea.

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[101] *VC*, §ii.42: *ultra humani excursus modum et inremeabilis videbatur*; Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, pp. 163-4, 280-3, 318-21.
[102] *Altus Prosator*, §N; *VC*, §ii.42.
[103] An ecocritical interpretation of the biblical ocean by William P. Brown (*The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 141-60) has argued that Leviathan was left to roam at its pleasure as part of a balanced ecosystem, even if some predation of humanity might be involved. For a more traditional interpretation, that Leviathan is a plaything of God, that one should wonder at God's control, and acknowledge that danger and chaos are at His fingertips, see the recent chapter of Gert Kwakkel, 'The Monster as a Toy: Leviathan in Psalm 104:26', in Koert van Bekkum *et al*., *Playing with Leviathan: Interpretation and Reception of Monsters from the Biblical World* (Leiden, 2017), pp. 87-9.
[104] *VC*, §i.5: *Quem tamen dominus sic terret, non ut navis naufragio in qua ipse resedet undis obruatur, sed potius ad orandum intentius suscitetur, ut ad nos deo propitio post transuadatum perveniat periculum*.

In response God sent a tempest, making the sea so treacherous that the ship almost capsized.[105] After singling out Jonah for offending God, the sailors threw him overboard into the sea where he was swallowed by a large fish and taken down into the abyss where he stayed for three days and nights.[106] There Jonah sang the psalms and sought out God's mercy: 'the waters engulf me even unto my soul: the abyss surrounds me, the sea covers my head', 'but I, in a voice of praise, will sacrifice to you: whatever I vow, I will render to the Lord for my salvation'.[107] Much like Colmán, standing at the prow beseeching the Lord, Jonah's prayers were heard and the sea-beast cast Jonah up on the dry beach, where, now corrected, he set off to follow God's original command and preach to the city of Nineve. Iona's monks reflected on the biblical story of Jonah. In the preface to his *Life of Columba*, Adomnán remarked on how Columba's name is a Latin synonym of the Hebrew 'Iona', both meaning 'dove'.[108] A further connection between Iona, Columba, and Jonah was an illustration in the *Book of Kells*'s Lucan genealogy, where a fish-man grabs a letter that indicated the name Iona (see *Figure 5*). This fish-man was probably a play on the biblical story, and referenced the connection between Jonah, Columba, and Christ as a way of showing devotion to the insular saint, suggesting a possible place of production for the *Book of Kells*.[109] The story of the sea monster that swallowed Jonah was also in all likelihood an inspiration for stories in the *Life of Columba* that featured ocean beasts: for example, the ocean creature that terrified

[105] Jon. 1:4-5, 1:13.
[106] Jon. 2:1.
[107] Jon. 2:6, 10; *cf.* Ps. 119:1, 17:7, 41:8, 30:23, 68:2, 141:4, 142:4, 17:6, 30:7.
[108] *VC*, §pref.2; on the origins of the name Iona, see Introduction, p. 7 n. 31.
[109] Jennifer O'Reilly, 'Exegesis and the Book of Kells: The Lucan Genealogy', in O'Mahony (ed.), *The Book of Kells*, pp. 345-54; Meyvaert, 'The Book of Kells and Iona', pp. 6-10; see also above, Introduction, p. 12 n. 61.

the monk Berach and Baithéne.[110]

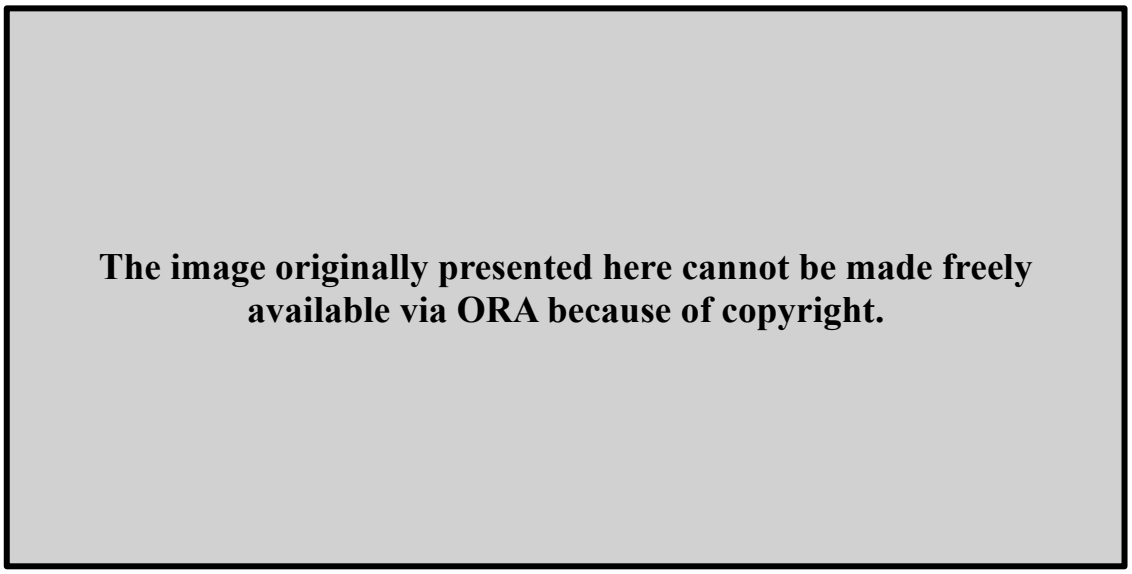


*Figure 5. Book of Kells, f. 201r*.[111]

In this story Baithéne offered Adomnán a way of exploring the biblical tension between the ocean, and the monsters in it, being both a threat to humanity and under God's command. Columba's successor overcame the beast between Iona and Tiree through his faith that both he '"and that beast [were] subject to the power of God"': his '"faith in Christ defended [him] from the danger"'.[112] It was understandable that Berach was terrified by the dangers of the ocean. It marked Baithéne out as a saint that his faith in God's total control over the natural world could withstand the very human fear of ocean chaos. Even Columba could become afraid when facing the ocean. This is seen most vividly when Columba was caught in a boat close to capsizing. He and the other sailors were desperately trying to bail out the water until, from vainly pouring out 'bitter water into the blue wave', Columba

[110] *VC*, §i.19; Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, n. 50.
[111] *The Book of Kells*, Copyright The Board of Trinity College Dublin. Images are available for single-use academic application only: https://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/concern/works/hm50tr726?locale=en (16 Jun. 2025).
[112] *VC*, §i.19: *'Ego et illa bilua sub dei potestate sumus' […], 'Fides tua in Christo te ab hoc defendet periculo'*.

turned to prayer.[113] Like Colmán in the whirlpool, and like Jonah singing psalms in the belly of the whale, Columba and his fellow sailors were delivered by their faith and reverence towards God. The reliance on divine aid, rather than the human, is a hagiographical trope present in insular literature that is often used to signal the holiness of the author's subject or mission.[114] This pattern of choosing faith when confronted with the terrible forces of nature has in fact been associated with particularly an insular and Ionan approach to miracle working and sanctity.[115]

Nevertheless, this faith in God's protection wrestled with the natural fear of death amid an ocean storm, as Columba's sailors asked not for prayers of deliverance, but prayers for the dying. 'What you do now does not greatly profit us in danger. You ought more usefully to pray for us perishing'.[116] Torn between a faith in God's protection and the feeling of helplessness in the face of environmental chaos, the representation of the ocean in the *Life of Columba* seems to further mirror how this same tension is addressed in the story of Jonah. Jonah in the belly of the great fish sang the psalms in hope, but felt that God had punished and abandoned him:

> And you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the sea, and the flood engulfed me: all your eddies, and your waves have passed over me. And I said: I am cast out from the sight of your eyes; but I will yet see your holy temple again.[117]

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[113] *VC* §ii.12: *Quo audito aquam cessat amaram ex inani re hi nin glas […] fundere*. '*Hi nin glas*' is Old Irish for 'into the blue wave'.
[114] Two examples of such a switch from human to divine aid can be seen in Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* and in *The Voyage of Snédgus and Mac Riagla*: Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, §3; *Immram Snédgusa ocus Maic Riagla*, ed. and trans. Kevin Murray, 'The Voyaging of St Columba's Clerics', in John Carey, Emma Nic Cárthaigh, and Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh (eds.), *The End and Beyond: Medieval Irish Eschatology* (2 vols, Aberystwyth, 2014), ii, prose, §1, verse, §§7-8. This was also a technique found in the Bible to proclaim God's power, that of His chosen people, and deride the weakness of others: Debra Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 173-85.
[115] Trent Foley, *Images of Sanctity*, pp. 110-18.
[116] *VC* §ii.12: *Quod nunc agis non magnopere nobis proficit periclitantibus; exorare potius debes pro pereuntibus*.
[117] Jon. 2:4-5.

Despite his isolation in the deep and perception that he was outside of God's thinking, Jonah built up his confidence that the Lord might hear him and answer his prayers, a belief that God would 'raise up [his] life from the corruption'.[118] The Ionan poetry seems to have likewise called on the saving grace of God in such ocean violence: *Adiutor Laborantium* featured an Ionan monk 'sailing through the storm' seeking the protection of God who is a 'guard to the ramparts and defender of the faithful':

> Light and father of lights
> Shining with great light,
> Denying to no one hopeful
> Your strength and help,
> I pray that I, a little man
> Shivering and most wretched,
> Rowing through the storm,
> Infinite in this world,
> Be drawn after Him to the celestial
> Most beautiful harbour of life.[119]

Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus have identified this anxiety and fear in the face of the natural world as a theme common to many of the Ionan poems and some Old Irish nature poetry, contrary to the perception that 'Celtic Christian' harmony

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[118] Jon. 2:7.

[119] *Adiutor Laborantium*, ll. 3-4, 12-21:

> *Custos ad propugnaculum*
> *Defensorque credentium […]*
> *Lumen et pater luminum,*
> *Magna luce lucentium,*
> *Nulli negans sperantium*
> *Opem atque auxilium,*
> *Precor ut me hommunculum*
> *Quassatum ac miserimum*
> *Remigantem per tumultum*
> *Saeculi istius infinitum*
> *Trahat post se ad supernum*
> *Vitae portum pulcherrimum*

with the natural world was the dominant outlook of the time.[120] This theme is also seen in the Ionan poem *Noli Pater*:

> Father, do not allow thunder and lightning
> lest we be shattered by its fear and its fire.[121]

Clancy and Márkus have gone on to suggest that the poems of Iona's monks reflected their fear of natural chaos.[122] Just as the terror of bishop Colmán, trapped in the whirlpool, was an instrument of God to drive him to more fervent prayer, these poems and stories in the *Life of Columba* asked the reader to seek a closer love of God through their fear. Put in an Augustinian way by Clancy and Márkus, 'the needle of fear draws after it the thread of love'.[123] It is an interesting coincidence that the *Alphabet of Devotion*, a text attributed to Colmán moccu Sailni and a potential 'second-hand version of Columba's philosophy', started by telling the reader, in a similar way to Augustine, that 'he who will not have fear of God, will not have love of God'.[124] These Ionan texts were similar to the psalms sung by Jonah in the belly of the whale, calling the minds of Columba's monks back to the love God had for them, the holiness of their mission, and that the chaotic world was all within His

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[120] Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 89-93. This was not unique to the Irish, Anglo-Saxon poetry also confronted the weakness of humanity in the face of the harsh natural world: Neville, *The Natural World in Old English Poetry*, pp. 36-43.

[121] *Noli Pater*, ed. and trans. Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, ll. 1-2:
> *Noli Pater indulgere tonitrua cum fulgore*
> *ne frangamur formidine huius atque uridine*.

[122] *Cf.* Mary Low, 'The Natural World in Early Irish Christianity: An Ecological Footnote', in Mark Atherton (ed.), *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland* (Cardiff, 2002), p. 170, n. 6. While Low dismissed the fear of thunder and lightning as revealing a fearful Ionan attitude towards nature, there were parallel references to this fear and its divine, or demonic, meaning in history: Jean-Pierre Devroey, *De la Grêle et du Tonnerre: Histoire Médiévale des Imaginaires Paysans* (Paris, 2024), pp. 41-7, 65-9, 100-2.

[123] Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John: Tractatus in Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos*, trans. Boniface Ramsay (New York NY, 2008), §9.4; Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 75-6.

[124] *The Alphabet of Devotion*, trans. Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 195-6, 200.

ordering: they would see Iona again, a small part of the universal temple of Christ's Church.[125]

The key New Testament story that shaped Iona's understanding of the ocean was Christ on the Sea of Galilee. Christ, like Jonah, boarded a boat and quickly fell asleep on the journey.[126] When the seas became rough the apostles woke Jesus. Christ, perturbed, rebuked his apostles asking, 'why are you fearful, O ye of little faith?'. Then, 'rising up he commanded the winds, and the sea, and there came a great calm. Thereafter the men wondered, saying: What manner of man is this, for the winds and the sea obey him?"'.[127] In a related story, Christ walked on the sea of Galilee and called to Peter to walk out on the water with him despite the 'contrary winds':

> And Peter going down out of the boat, walked upon the water to come to Jesus. But seeing the wind strong, he was afraid: and when he began to sink, he cried out, saying: Lord, save me! And Immediately Jesus stretching forth his hand took hold of him and said to him: O thou of little faith, why didst thou doubt?[128]

Much like Peter, when the monk of Iona who wrote *Adiutor Laborantium* rode upon the waves of the ocean in an 'infinite storm', it was natural to fear the strong gusts and rough waves, and it was far harder to trust faithfully in the 'strength and help' of the 'Father of lights'.[129] This gospel story had a particular resonance with Iona but also across early Christian Ireland. A boat motif on the Kilnaruane Pillar has been interpreted as Christ crossing the Sea of Galilee, and a commentary on Mark of possible Irish origin, perhaps even written on Iona, reinterpreted the crossing on the sea of Galilee as Christ and his apostles sailing in an Irish currach: 'the boat, made of

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[125] *Cf*. Conor O'Brien, *Bede's Temple: An Image and Its Interpretation* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 83-9.
[126] Jon. 1:5; Matt. 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-40; Luke 8:22-25.
[127] Matt. 8:26-27.
[128] Matt. 14:24, 14:29-31.
[129] See above, p. 164.

dead skins, contains living beings'.[130] In the *Life of Columba*, during the third voyage of Cormac when the prayers of Columba and his monks turned the winds and brought him home, Adomnán adapted the language of the gospel story to reflect Iona's ocean environment:

> Let the reader therefore consider how great and of what kind this blessed man was, who had such prophetic knowledge, and who could command the winds and the ocean by invoking Christ's name.[131]

It was a trope of hagiographies to model their saintly subjects on Christ, but it is notable that Christ's relationship with the sea closely mirrored the ocean's portrayal in the *Life of Columba*. Sailing to the 'country of the Gerasens', Christ cast out demons; returning by boat He healed the sick and raised the dead; it was sailing that He fled the crowds trying to crown Him king; and it was on a boat that He preached to the multitudes gathered on the shore.[132] For Christ, the sea was a tool in the mission he handed on to the apostles: 'heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils', 'preach ye upon the housetops', 'but beware of men'.[133] As Christ's successor in the gospel mission, St Paul likewise took to the sea and, despite facing shipwreck three times, he continued to sail and trust in God despite his punishments.[134] Christ's use of the sea, both connecting Him and separating Him, was certainly something echoed in Iona's own use of the ocean both for connecting the monks and abbots to their surroundings, and keeping visitors away, separating

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[130] *The First Commentary on Mark: An Annotated Translation*, ed. and trans. Michael Cahill (London, 1998), pp. 52-3; Peter Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland: An Iconographical and Photographic Survey* (3 vols, Bonn, 1992), i, pp. 131-2; Wooding, 'St Brendan's Boat: Dead Hides and the Living Sea', pp. 87-9, nn. 61-3.
[131] *VC*, §ii.42: *Perpendat itaque lector quantas et qualis idem vir beatus, qui talem profeticam habens scientiam ventis et ociano Christi invocato nomine potuit imperare*; *cf*. Matt. 8:27: *qualis est hic, quia venti et mari obedient ei*.
[132] Matt. 8:2-3, 8:18, 14:13-14; Mark 4:1-2; John 6:15-16.
[133] Matt. 10:8, 10:17, 10:27.
[134] 2 Cor. 11:22-26.

the island from the sinful world.[135] Adomnán and the other Ionan authors seem to have also drawn on Christ's use of seaways to portray Columba's saintliness. Like Christ, Columba and his monks used the ocean landscape to carry out the apostolic mission in the insular world: he sailed away from secular glory, he sailed to baptise, sailed to raise the dead, and sailed to cure disease.[136] What Christ-type was adopted in a monastery's hagiography and literature said a great deal about the values of those that produced and read the texts. The Christ who separated himself and avoided the crowds was associated with the tradition of St Anthony, while the more outgoing and pastoral Christ, who maintained a contemplative life, was a more Augustinian type.[137] Scholars have tended to associate Irish sanctity with the former tradition, but it should be noted that Columba's use of seaways allowed him to be a very social saint.[138] Adomnán and the Ionan authors not only adapted the language of Christ on the Sea of Galilee to suit the context of Iona's own environment, Columba's performance of holiness spoke to the vision of Christ that they valued and related to.

David Jenkins has suggested that the parallels between Columba and Christ evoked by Adomnán went beyond the norm for hagiographers, to the point Columba became the exact embodiment of Christ's ministry in the British Isles.[139] Columba was a Hebridean Christ, who commanded the 'ocean' not the 'sea'. When Columba turned to prayer after bailing out the boat and calmed the storm, he chose the faith that Christ preached to his apostles on Galilee, and overcame the anxiety of the

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[135] *VC*, §§ii.45, iii.23.
[136] *VC*, §§i.33, ii.4, ii.10, ii.32; Beccán mac Luigdech, *Tiugraind Beccáin*, §19.
[137] Clare Stancliffe, 'Cuthbert and the Polarity Between Pastor and Solitary', in Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, and Clare Stancliffe (eds.), *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200* (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 26-8.
[138] Stancliffe, 'Cuthbert and the Polarity Between Pastor and Solitary', pp. 39-40; *id*., 'The Irish tradition in Northumbria after the Synod of Whitby', in Richard Gameson (ed.), *The Lindisfarne Gospels: New Perspectives* (Leiden, 2017), pp. 29-30.
[139] Jenkins, '*Imago Christi*?', pp. 144-8.

ocean's danger, showing himself to be truly in the image of Christ. Likewise, it was Baithéne's ability to show faith and be fearless in the face of ocean chaos that proved he could be the saintly successor to Columba.[140] Both Columba and Baithéne reached a more Christ-like state in showing their faith in providence. The *Life of Columba* crafted an image of Columba, a Christ amid the ocean, who along with the poems provided the Ionan *familia* with a comfort in the chaos of their environment. Living a life in the footsteps of Christ, with true faith in God and His power, was just as possible in the stormy ocean environment of northern Britain and Ireland as it was in the Holy Land, or Rome, or elsewhere: Columba had proved it.

The biblical authors struggled with how to depict the sea as an environment that was ordered, yet simultaneously so chaotic and dangerous. This tension is deeply integrated into the literature of Iona. Columba's *familia* struggled with real fear when confronted with their dangerous ocean environment that surrounded them and sometimes doubted their faith. This led to the ocean becoming one of the most striking metaphors used to describe the life of a Columban monk.[141] The Ionan poems and Adomnán's depiction of Columba in the *Life of Columba* in some ways mimicked Jonah's psalm singing in the belly of the whale: they were attempts to build up confidence, in spite of the fear and anxiety they had towards the natural world and ocean chaos, that they were held in providence, not 'cast away out of the sight of [God's] eyes'.[142] The New Testament offered a perfect man who was immune to such fear. The story of Christ on Galilee appealed to the monks of Iona because it presented such a familiar ideal of fearlessness in the face of natural chaos. The ultimate comfort for Iona's monks was that Columba had achieved Christ's level

[140] Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, pp. 164-5; *VC*, §i.19.
[141] *Adiutor Laborantium*, ll. 12-25.
[142] Jon. 2:5.

of faith in God's power, and could face the ocean and its unpredictability without fear, sailing in His wake.

Patristic and Late Antique Influences

Patristic and late antique authors filled the library available to the monks of Iona.[143] The Church Fathers were a key influence on how the Columban monks understood their faith, society, and the natural world; their influence was second only to the biblical texts themselves, showing that the Ionan *familia* is better seen as in dialogue with the continental and late antique Christian tradition than somehow apart from it.[144] It is striking however that so few references to the ocean were made by patristic authors. For a monastery facing the Atlantic, and so bonded to that context, to what extent could the late antique reading of Iona's monks influence their environmental thought at all?

St Augustine wrote on the wonder people felt when seeing sublime natural phenomena: 'men go to wonder at the tallest mountains, the most powerful waves of the sea, the widest rushing rivers, the ocean's edge, and the courses of the constellations'.[145] Augustine complained that people lack this same interest in themselves and their internal ability to capture these natural phenomena in their memory and imagination. In doing so, he reported that it was in his mind's eye that he captured the images of the 'mountains, waves, rivers, and stars, which [he has] seen, and the ocean, which [he trusts] to be', suggesting that he had never seen it

[143] This is quickly apparent in Thomas O'Loughlin's breakdown of Iona's library (*Adomnán and the Holy Places*, pp. 246-9), but one should note that the scholarly understanding of the Ionan library is shaped primarily by the learning and interests of Adomnán.
[144] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 286-7; Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 211-22.
[145] Augustine, *Confessiones*, ed. Lucas Verheijen, CCSL 27 (1981), §§x.8, ll. 64-70: *Et eunt homines mirari alta montium et ingentes fluctus maris et latissimos lapsus fluminum et Oceani ambitum et gyros siderum*; *id*., trans. Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford, 1991), §x.8.16.

himself.[146] St Jerome and Cassiodorus also either hinted at or declared their lack of personal experience and knowledge of the ocean.[147] All three authors, key to the thought of Iona, then shunned the reality of the ocean and instead showed a far greater interest in an internal or metaphorical ocean: 'I entered the ocean of holy scripture and God's mysteries, that is to say a labyrinth'; 'the entirety of the psalm ought to be sweetly embraced [...] with a wonder as deep as the ocean'; 'the number [of ages] would seem as if we compared the smallest drop of dew to the entire sea, no, to the surrounding ocean'.[148]

Patristic authors also borrowed the geographical views that classical authors held of the ocean: particularly the belief that the Mediterranean was the heart of the inhabited and civilised world. The late antique adoption of this attitude had a significant impact on Ionan self-perception, and on how the monks viewed the ocean, because this perspective was now charged with Christianity. The ocean periphery not only engendered barbarism and ignorance, it must also be conquered and cured by Christian thought born and nurtured around the Great Sea. Paulinus of Nola reflected this attitude in his letters:

> Situated at the edge of the world, the howling ocean buffets the land with savage waves; the peoples of those remote nations, who were subsiding in refuges along the sandy way of the sea [...] rejoice at the rising dawn of the Lord's light [...] where before with feeble breath true faith had blown.[149]

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[146] Augustine, *Confessiones*, §§x.8, ll. 64-70: *nisi montes et fluctus et flumina et sidera, quae uidi, et oceanum, quem credidi*.
[147] Cassiodorus, *Expositio Psalmorum*, ed. Marc Adriaen, CCSL 97-98 (1958), 98, Ps. 71:214-216, Ps. 134:105-110; Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, ed. Marc Adriaen, CCSL 72 (1959), §§1:9/10.219-26.
[148] Cassiodorus, *Expositio Psalmorum*, CCSL 98, Ps. 118:3289-3291: *Amplectendus suaviter omnino psalmus [...] admiratione profunditatis oceanus*; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, ed. Bernhard Dombart and Alfons Kalb, CCSL 47-48 (1955), 48, §xxii.13.20-35: *nec saltem tanta videri debeat, quanta si umoris brevissimam guttam universo mari, etiam quantum oceanus circumfluit, comparemus*; Jerome, *Commentarii in Hiezechielem*, ed. François Glorie, CCSL 75 (1964), §xiv.pref.10-11: *Ita et ego, sanctarum scripturarum ingressus oceanum et mysteriorum Dei ut sic loquar labyrinthum*.
[149] Paulinus of Nola, *Epistulae*, ed. Wilhelm von Hartel, CSEL 29 (Vienna, 1894), §18.4: *situ orbis extrema, quam barbaris fluctibus fremens tundit oceanus, gentium populus remotarum, qui sedebat in latebris via maris harenosa [...]orta sibi per tuam sanctitatem a Domino luce gaudentes corda aspera*

In the work of Isidore of Seville the ocean was simply the border to the land, given little to no character, and it is the Mediterranean and the surrounding territory that deserved a detailed treatment.[150] Even once Christian practice was brought to this savage border region, the faith of these converts could be seen as inferior or dangerous. Jerome spoke of an acquaintance who left the 'coast of the ocean' to find 'heavenly bread' in Bethlehem.[151] More pointedly, Jerome scorned the British heretic Pelagius as one 'most stupid and fat with Irish porridge': you can read a level of Johnsonian mockery in this comment.[152]

Furthermore, the ocean was also seen to hide the Pelagian heretical tendencies of the insular world from the oversight of Rome, making it a target for late antique civilising missions celebrated by writers such as Prosper of Aquitaine:

> With no hesitation [Pope Celestine] liberated the British Isles from this same sickness when he drove out, even from the secrecy of the ocean, those certain enemies of grace occupying one of their places of origin, and having ordained a bishop for the Irish, whilst he strived to keep a Roman island Catholic, he also made a barbarian island Christian.[153]

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*Christo intrante posuerunt. [...] quem tenui antehac spiritu fides veritatis adflaverat*; *id*., trans. P.G. Walsh, *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola*, ACW 35-36 (1967), 35, §18.4.

[150] Isidore, *De Natura Rerum*, trans. Calvin B. Kendall and Faith Wallis, *Isidore of Seville: On the Nature of Things* (Liverpool, 2016), §§40.1-3, 44(-).1-5, 48(47).1-3, see also p. 3; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, §§13.13-20. Though discounted recently, some have suggested that chapter 44(-) of Isidore's *On the Nature of Things* was an Irish addition: William McCready, 'Bede, Isidore and the *Epistola Cuthberti*', *Traditio*, 50 (1995), p. 89 n. 50.

[151] Jerome, *Epistulae*, ed. Isidor Hilberg, CSEL 54-56 (Vienna, 1910-18), 56, §121.pref: *de oceani litore atque ultimis finibus Galliarum Roma praeterita quaesivit Bethleem, ut inveniret in ea caelestem panem*; *id*., trans. W.H. Fremantle, *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, NPNF2 6 (Buffalo NY, 1893).

[152] Jerome, *In Hieremiam Prohetam Libri VI*, ed. Siegfried Reiter, CCSL 74 (1960), §prol.4: *Nec recordatur stolidissimus et Scottorum pultibus praegravatus*; Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language […]* (2 vols, London, 1755), ii, 'Oats'.

[153] Prosper of Aquitaine, *De Gratia Dei et Libero Arbitrio Contra Collatorem*, PL 51 (1861), §21.2: *Nec vero segniore cura ab hoc eodem morbo Britannias liberavit, quando quosdam inimicos gratiae solum suae originis occupantes, etiam ab illo secreto exclusit Oceani, et ordinato Scotis episcopo [scilicet Palladio], dum Romanam insulam studet servare catholicam, fecit etiam barbaram Christianam*.

Pelagianism, the belief that one's actions rather than the grace of God were the means of salvation, was supressed after notable criticism by Augustine and Jerome.[154] Augustine had put forward a view of salvation centred on the role of grace that came to be integrated more into Catholic doctrine.[155] This shift towards a more Augustinian doctrine of grace, and defining Pelagianism as heresy, may not have taken root in the British Isles: called 'pre-Pelagian' by R.A. Markus, insular communities may have held a form of Christianity unaffected by these distant controversies.[156] Others have taken the Pelagian influence further, arguing that some elements of Pelagianism were characteristic of 'Celtic Christianity'.[157] There are even suggestions of Pelagian belief in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* and other Ionan writings.[158] The anti-Pelagian messaging of late antiquity was certainly repackaged to attack the peripheral place of Iona and the insular world during the Easter Controversy.[159] Iona, seeing their own Easter traditions as correct, and thus rejecting the universal Church's view, were seen as akin to Pelagians believing that their

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[154] For a summary see Gerald Bonner, 'Pelagius (*fl. c.* 390-418)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Sept. 2004), https://www-oxforddnb-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-21784 (2 May 2025). It has been recently questioned whether Pelagianism even existed: Ali Bonner, *The Myth of Pelagianism* (Oxford, 2018); *cf.* Peter Brown, 'The Myth of Pelagianism?', *Peritia*, 29 (2018), esp. pp. 238-46.

[155] However, Augustine's full doctrine of grace was not accepted as mainstream orthodoxy: Gerald Bonner, 'The Pelagian Controversy in Britain and Ireland', *Peritia*, 16 (2002), pp. 144-51; R.A. Markus, 'The Legacy of Pelagius: Orthodoxy, Heresy and Conciliation', in Rowan Williams (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 214-27.

[156] R.A. Markus, 'Pelagianism: Britain and the Continent', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 37:2 (1986), pp. 199-204.

[157] Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, pp. 80-101; see the reviews by Bonner, 'The Pelagian Controversy in Britain and Ireland', pp. 153-5; and the extensive review and criticism of Gilbert Márkus, 'Pelagianism and the "Common Celtic Church"', *The Innes Review*, 56:2 (2005), pp. 165-213.

[158] Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, pp. 95-6, 117-20, have pointed out 'good pagan' episodes in the *Life of Columba* (*VC*, §§i.33, iii.14), and examples of Celtic Christian or Pelagian attitudes in the Ionan poems (*Altus Prosator*, §§F-H, and *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §v). See the criticisms of these interpretations by Márkus, 'Pelagianism and the "Common Celtic Church"', pp. 185-7, 200-202, and by Helen Conrad-O'Briain, 'Grace and Election in Adomnán's *Vita S. Columbae*', *Hermathena*, 172 (2002), pp. 25-38.

[159] Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, '"New Heresy for Old": Pelagianism in Ireland and the Papal Letter of 640', *Speculum*, 60:3 (1985), pp. 506-16; *HE*, §ii.19.

actions alone were sufficient for salvation, needing no grace from God. Bede in fact closed his *Ecclesiastical History* with a letter of the abbot Ceolfrith which directly accused Iona's monks of Pelagianism.[160] The important place this accusation had in Bede's work not only showed the continuing significance of the late antique Pelagian stain attributed to the insular world, but also has been interpreted by Rowan Williams as Bede believing that the British Isles were in need of constant and recurring correction by the core of the medieval world, inevitably moving towards heresy otherwise.[161] Maybe this was because their physical ocean surroundings detached them from the continent; it does seem that Bede and Prosper's anxiety about the insular world breaking away from the body of the universal Church arose in part from its geography: being an archipelago divided physically from the body of the Eurasian continent.

Iona's response to the classical idea of Mediterranean centrality, now recalibrated by the Church Fathers to have a distinctly Christian character, was mixed. In the conclusion to the *Life of Columba*, Adomnán's seems to have accepted this centre-periphery model:

> His name, though he remained on this tiny and most remote island of the Britannic Ocean, clearly deserves to be renowned not merely throughout our Ireland, and in Britain, the greatest of all the islands in the world, but also known as far as three-cornered Spain, in Gaul, and across the Pennine Alps in Italy, also to that city of Rome, which is the chief of all cities.[162]

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[160] In this case both the Columbans and those who followed the Victorian Easter were accused of Pelagianism: *HE*, §v.21; Ó Cróinín, '"New Heresy for Old"', pp. 515-16. The Pelagian 'heresy' of Iona also became linked to accusations of 'Jewishness' because they followed native traditions, rejecting the universal Church of Christ: O'Brien, *Bede's Temple*, pp. 60-3, 142-4.

[161] Rowan Williams, 'Theology and the Paschal Controversy: Bede's Case Against the British Church', in Santha Bhattacharji, Dominic Mattos, and Rowan Williams (eds.), *Prayer and Thought in Monastic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Benedicta Ward* (London, 2014), pp. 31-44.

[162] *VC*, §iii.23: *nomen eius non tantum per totam nostram Scotiam, et omnium totius orbis insularum maximam Brittanniam, clare devulgari promeruit in hac parua et extrema ociani brittanici commoratus insula, sed etiam ad trigonam usque Hispaniam, et Gallias, et ultra Alpes pininas Italiam sitam pervenire, ipsam quoque Romanam civitatem, quae caput est omnium civitatum*.

However, the view that the ocean and Iona were definitionally peripheral also gave the Columban monks a deep sense of meaning in this new Christian context. This is best introduced by pope Leo the Great, whose sermons were in the library of Iona. He claimed that the imperium of the Roman papacy and the heirs of St Peter, gained 'by land and sea', was now greater than the empire of Augustus:

> [The saints Peter and Paul] are the men who advanced [Rome] to this state of fame, that, as a holy race, a chosen people, a priestly and royal city, through the seat of blessed St Peter made the chief city of the world, you command more lands through divine reverence than through conquest. Indeed, you have extended by land, by sea, by very many victories, your dominion, and yet, what by work of war you subdued, is less than what by the peace of Christ was made your subject.[163]

To expand the territory of Christendom was to be celebrated, and the missionaries at the edge of the world were esteemed contributors to this task. Adomnán's *On the Holy Places* showed these insular monks yearning to learn about the ideas, places, and stories of the holy land at the heart of Christendom. It was undeniably centred around the Mediterranean.[164] It is not obvious that they appreciated their own role in expanding the dominium of Rome. Yet as discussed by Thomas O'Loughlin, *On the Holy Places* was also responding to this centre-periphery model by placing the *familia* of Columba in relation to the apostolic mission.[165] It framed the journey of Arculf as starting in Jerusalem and ending in Iona, standing as testimony to the learning and achievements of the Columban missionaries at the extreme of Christian expansion. That the monks of Iona seem to have ordered and constructed their

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[163] Leo the Great, *Sermones*, ed. and trans. René Dolle, *Léon le Grand: Sermons*, SC 22, 49, 74, 200 (1964, 1969, 2003, 1973), 200, §69.1 (82): *Isti sunt qui te ad hanc gloriam provexerunt, ut gens sancta, populus electus, civitas sacerdotalis et regia, per sacram beati Petri sedem caput orbis effecta, latius praesideres religione divina quam dominatione terrena. Quamvis enim multis aucta victoriis jus imperii tui terra marique protuleris, minus tamen est quod tibi bellicus labor subdidit quam quod pax Christiana subjecit*. Such triumphalism may have in fact been more 'aspiration rather than achievement', see T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Palladius, Prosper, and Leo the Great', in David Dumville (ed.), *Saint Patrick, A.D. 493-1993* (Woodbridge, 1993), p. 9.

[164] See Chapter Two, pp. 129-37.

[165] O'Loughlin, 'The View from Iona', pp. 114-16.

monastery on the model of Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre (as depicted in *On the Holy Places*) showed that they saw the importance of building a New Jerusalem in the Hebrides.[166] This gave the monastery of Iona and its mission value in the broader Christian narrative. So much so that Adomnán believed that their holy ascetic battle on the edge of the world would send the fame of Columba rippling back to the centre, crashing against the waves of the Roman-Mediterranean hegemony.

The late antique authors read by Iona's monks did provide another significant way of seeing the ocean or sea that shaped the thought of the Hebridean monastery: the image of the *navis crucis*. Most associated with Hippolytus of Rome, this metaphor sees the cross and its power to save as a boat and was popular throughout late antiquity.[167] This image developed out of the gospel story of Christ sleeping during the sea-storm on Galilee, and came to be integrated into some of the most important texts in insular literature.[168] An Irish commentary on the four evangelists glossed this image, or specifically the *navis ecclesiae*, to those very passages in the New Testament.[169] In Hippolytus, the boat became the Church; the sea, the world (the *saeculum*); the pilot, Christ; the tillers, the Old and New Testaments; and the sailyard, the cross itself.[170] St Augustine carried on the metaphor, comparing the journey towards the kingdom of heaven as like sailing back to one's homeland: the

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[166] Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem "At the Ends of the Earth"', pp. 33-85.
[167] References to a similar image can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible: Wis. 14:3-7.
[168] For example, the *navis crucis* image seems an important element in the *Dream of the Rood*: Carl T. Berkhout, 'The Problem of OE *Holmwudu*', *Mediaeval Studies*, 36 (1974), pp. 429-33. Similar imagery was also used in the writings of Columbanus: *Epistulae*, §§v.3, v.11.
[169] Pseudo-Hieronymus, *Expositionis IV Evangeliorum Recensio I*, PL 30 (1846), col. 544, §§A-B; Michael Lapidge and Richard Sharpe, *A Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature 400-1200* (Dublin, 1985), §B341, pp. 97-8, and Martin McNamara, *The Bible in the Early Irish Church, A.D. 550 to 850* (Leiden, 2022), Appendix 1, §2.2, for a summary of the evidence for its Irishness.
[170] Hippolytus of Rome, *De Christo et Antichristo*, trans. S.D.F Salmond, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Arthur Cleveland Coxe (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, 5 (Grand Rapids MI, 1981), §59.

only hope of arriving was to stay in the boat, the representation of the Lord's cross, 'for however strong his arms, he who swims in the deep eventually will be overwhelmed by the vastness of the sea, and it will devour him, and he will drown'.[171] It also appeared in Cassiodorus who outlined the late antique interpretation of the sea as the world itself, the *saeculum*: the bitterness of sea water represents its falsehoods, whereas waves and storms represent the ubiquity of sin and vice conjured by the devil and demons.[172] The identification between the sail arm and the cross in Hippolytus is brought back in Paulinus of Nola: 'they lash the sail of their hearts to the sailyard of the cross, with cords of charity as line'.[173]

Augustine, Cassiodorus, and Paulinus of Nola were all prominent authors in the library of Iona, showing the route that this metaphor may have taken to be found in the *Life of Columba*. Sailing back to Iona after retrieving timber from Scotland's inland, Adomnán and his sailors were confronted by contrary winds. After gaining the blessing of St Columba, who looked down on his successor favourably, the winds changed and Adomnán tells the reader,

> I then commanded the sailors to raise the sailyards like crosses and hoist the halyards, unfolding the sails aloft; we reached our island that same day by fair and gentle winds and without any effort.[174]

Ordering his monks to raise up the sailyards in the manner of the cross, *antemnas crucis instar*, Adomnán saw their journey among the Scottish ocean-ways as one metaphorically connected to the cross and the passion of Christ. The *navis crucis*

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[171] Augustine, *Sermones*, PL 38 (1963), §75.2: *Quantasvis enim vires habeat lacertorum qui natat in pelago, aliquando magnitudine maris victus absorbetur et mergitur*.
[172] Cassiodorus, *Expositio Psalmorum*, CCSL 98, Ps. 103:535-552.
[173] Paulinus of Nola, *Epistulae*, §23.30: *et cordis sui velum vinculis caritatis ut funibus ad antemnam crucis stringunt*.
[174] *VC*, §ii.45: *Iusi tum nautae antemnas crucis instar et vela protensis sublevant rudentibus; prosperisque et lenibus flabris eadem die nostram appetentes insulam sine ulla labortione*.

image may also have influenced the poems of Beccán mac Luigdech where the sea became an environment where the crucifixion played out:

> he crucified – not for crimes –
> his body on the blue waves.[175]

The patristic view that the world itself, the *saeculum*, was the stormy sea, is echoed in the Ionan poem *Adiutor Laborantium*:

> rowing through the storm,
> infinite in this world (*Saeculi istius*).[176]

The *Life of Columba* featured another story where the sailyards are raised: when the saint was confronted by Pictish *magi* who sent contrary winds to stop his journey back to Iona.[177] In this episode raising the sailyard was not said outright to be like lifting a cross, but the square-sailed construction of Iona's boats would have been known to the monks, as well as the language of the Church Fathers. They could have recognised the symbolic power of Columba raising the sails as putting his faith in the sign of the cross in contrast to the pagan weather magic they were confronting.[178]

In this same episode Adomnán cited the *Life of the Bishop Germanus* by Constantius of Lyon, showing how another late antique literary exploration of the ocean influenced Iona's monks. The *Life of Germanus* was certainly circulating at this time. It was known to Bede who quoted it along with Prosper of Aquitaine to tell the story of the Pelagian heresy in Britain.[179] In the first crossing of the English Channel made by Germanus he encountered a storm that looked like it would capsize his boat, but having fallen asleep, another evocation of Christ sleeping on the Sea of

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[175] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Fo Réir Choluimb*, §2; see above, n. 76.
[176] *Adiutor Laborantium*, ll. 16-20; see above, n. 119.
[177] *VC*, §ii.34.
[178] This story occurred before the first episode where the description of the sailyard as the cross (*VC*, §ii.45), but Adomnán did not structure the *Life* as a linear texts, and said so outright (*VC*, §pref.). This symbolism was meant to be read backwards if one did not recognise it already.
[179] *HE*, §§i.17-24.

Galilee, his companions were left alone trying to battle the waves and winds.[180] Constantius added that it was demons who stirred up the gales and waves, and furthermore that they were attacking the 'religion' represented by the boat of Germanus.[181] The ship was steered by 'prayer' under the leadership of Christ and 'not by muscles'. When Germanus woke up, he chided the ocean like Christ and after blessing the Channel with holy oil, an instrument of his episcopal rank, it calmed.[182] Adomnán not only cited Constantius but seemed to have borrowed some of the very language of this story and its use of the *navis crucis* image for a prominent episode in the hagiography of St Columba.[183]

Was Iona's use of this imagery simple adoption? Looking again at St Germanus's crossing to Britain is a good way to answer this question. Whereas St Germanus fell asleep on the sea during his crossing to Britain, St Columba, in fear of capsizing and losing his life, turned to bailing out the boat in the middle of a storm.[184] It was in this closeness to death that Columba learned to trust God amidst the ocean, and thus became Christ-like by calming the storm. St Germanus set sail asleep and already embodied Christ. This pattern continued. St Germanus left the Bay of Gaul brought by light breezes until in the midst of the English Channel.[185] While some have speculated on the actual places of his departure and arrival, details of what specific seaways were navigated by Germanus are sparse.[186] The journey taken by St Germanus was just an opportunity to show the Christ-like character of

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[180] Constantius of Lyon, *Vita Germani*, §13.
[181] *Ibid*.
[182] Constantius of Lyon, *Vita Germani*, §13: *oratione, non viribus*; *cf. HE*, §iii.15.
[183] Compare Constantius of Lyon, *Vita Germani*, §13: *Qui periculi immanitate constantior Christum invocat*, to *VC*, §ii.34: *cimbulamque ascendens nautis esitantibus ipse constantior factus uelum contra uentum iubet subregi*.
[184] Constantius of Lyon, *Vita Germani*, §13; *VC*, §ii.12.
[185] Constantius of Lyon, *Vita Germani*, §13.
[186] René Borius has offered a number of possible routes: *Constance de Lyon: Vie de Saint Germain D'Auxerre*, SC 112 (1965), pp. 82-4, 212.

the saint, the ocean became merely a performative space to act out the story of Christ on Galilee, now with an episcopal twist: using the tools that show his rank as bishop to calm the storm. The sea in this sense was only an obstacle to be overcome, and once the challenge had been met, no further engagement was necessary: the reader gains no sense of where the saint disembarked, and in a later journey to Britain, any difficulties in travel were removed. The environment was conquered by the saint and needed no further discussion. This is even told to the reader by a demon that possessed a man in Italy who said to St Germanus, 'be content that you have vanquished us and the ocean by your prayers'.[187] In contrast, the previous chapter demonstrated the specificity with which Adomnán treated the local seascape of Iona.[188] Bringing back Augustine's discussion of the *navis crucis* image, St Germanus had reached his homeland in the kingdom of heaven, whereas St Columba and his monks were sat in the 'infinite storm' of the *saeculum*. In the *Life of Columba,* the ocean was a force that had to be confronted daily and was never wholly overcome.[189] As the stories of drowning monks found in the *Life* and other Ionan sources show, there was always the real potential for the Columban monks to lose their battle with the ocean.[190]

Iona's monks recognised that their ocean surroundings made them peripheral to the medieval world, but this sense of being on the edge of the world and delivering the gospel gave them an immense sense of meaning. Their literature

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[187] Constantius of Lyon, *Vita Germani*, §32: *sufficiat, quod nos et oceanum mare oratione superasti*. This language goes back to the conquests of Britain by the likes of Claudius who 'crossed and, as it were, conquered the Ocean', *traiecti et quasi domiti Oceani*: Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum*, ed. Robert A. Kaster, *De Vita Caesarum Libros VIII et De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus Librum* (Oxford, 2016), *Divus Claudius*: §17.3; see also, Diarmuid Scully, '"Proud Ocean Has Become a Servant": A Classical Topos in the Literature of Britain's Conquest and Conversion', in Elizabeth Mullins and Diarmuid Scully (eds.), *Listen, O Isles, Unto Me: Studies in Medieval Word and Image in Honour of Jennifer O'Reilly* (Cork, 2010), pp. 12-15.
[188] See above, Chapter Two, pp. 94-108.
[189] *VC*, §ii.15
[190] *VC*, §iii.13; *AU*, §691.5.

adopted late antique topoi related to the ocean to strengthen the meaning the environment gave to their monastic and Christian mission. When Adomnán used the *navis crucis* image, he associated the 'ship of Christ' and 'the ship of the cross' with the daily labours needed to repair and maintain the monastery.[191] What sets Ionan writings apart from their late antique influences was that the ocean depicted in their literature was a lived-in space, intimate and familiar, where Iona's monks could carry out their passion on the 'blue waves'.[192]

Early Irish Literature

Adomnán wrote the *Life of Columba* at a time when many insular hagiographies were circulating. In the middle of the seventh century Cogitosus wrote a *Life* of St Brigit for the community of Kildare.[193] Before the century was over, a hagiography St Patrick and an itinerary of his mission had been written by Muirchú and Tírechán for Armagh.[194] Adomnán and the Columban *familia* could have been playing catch-up in venerating their patron saint and their principal monastery.[195] These authors were certainly part of the same Irish intellectual milieu. Adomnán probably knew Muirchú personally: the Armagh priest was a signatory to his *Law of Innocents*.[196] Parts of Muirchú's *Life* attempted to establish the ecclesiastical and

[191] *VC*, §ii.45.
[192] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Fo Réir Choluimb*, §2.
[193] This was one of three potential early lives of Brigit: Kim McCone, 'Brigit in the Seventh Century: A Saint with Three Lives?', *Peritia*, 1 (1982), pp. 131-6; Ludwig Bieler, 'The Celtic Hagiographer', *Studia Patristica*, 5 (1962), pp. 246-8; Seán Connolly, 'Cogitosus's *Life of St Brigit*: Content and Value', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 117 (1987), p. 5.
[194] Bieler, *Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, pp. 1-2, 35-43. Catherine Swift has otherwise interpreted Tírechán's interests as more directed to Connacht, and not that interested in Armagh itself, if still the broader Patrician *familia*, 'Tírechán's Motives in Compiling the *Collectanea*: An Alternative Interpretation', *Ériu*, 45 (1994), pp. 54-7, 72-82.
[195] Picard, 'The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', pp. 169-73; Cumméne the White's collection of miracle stories probably never left Iona, although Clare Stancliffe has left the question open as to whether a copy was available in Northumbria: 'Cuthbert and the Polarity Between Pastor and Solitary', p. 23, n. 11.
[196] Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Guarantor List of *Cáin Adomnáin*, 697', pp. 180, 196.

spiritual overlordship of Armagh in Ireland, and in so doing challenged the abbots and *familia* of Iona.[197] When writing his *Life of Columba* Adomnán seems to have borrowed some language from Cogitosus's *Life of Brigit* as a reference when writing his own; Muirchú seems to have done the same.[198] It is probable that Adomnán and the other monks of Iona studied their rival monasteries for how they represented their patron saints, and perhaps how those communities represented the environment in their texts.

Tírechán's *Collectanea* appears however fundamentally uninterested in the ocean or the sea. When the sea or the ocean are mentioned, they are simple geographical markers to situate Patrick's journey in claiming monasteries, churches, and territory for the *paruchia* of Armagh.[199] Cogitosus's *Life of Brigit* similarly lacks many descriptions of the sea or ocean.[200] Almost all the nature miracles in the Brigitine *lives* are related to terrestrial agriculture and environments far from the shoreline.[201] In the *First Life of St Brigit* however, there is an account of how seals were hunted, and another story discussed an island ascetic who was uncomfortable

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[197] This is best seen in the two climaxes of Muirchú's *Life of Patrick*: the encounter at Tara, and the death of Patrick. These episodes court the Uí Néill kings, attempting to undercut Columba's and Adomnán's familial connections, and use an angelic prophecy to claim Armagh's supremacy over Ireland and the Irish: *Vita Patricii*, §§i.15(14)-i.21(20), ii.4-7(6). Michael Enright has interpreted Adomnán's *Life* as a 'quietly limited retort' to Muirchú: *Prophecy and Kingship*, pp. 85-8, 147-8.
[198] D.A. Bullough, 'Columba, Adomnan and the Achievement of Iona, Part I', *Scottish Historical Review*, 43 (1964), pp. 114 n. 3, 125-7. Adomnán also potentially used Cogitosus when writing his *De Locis Sanctis*: D.A. Bullough, 'Columba, Adomnan and the Achievement of Iona, Part II', *Scottish Historical Review*, 44 (1965), pp. 31-3; n. 203 below.
[199] Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §§18.1-4, 22.4, 44.2, 47.1.
[200] Cogitosus, *Vita Brigitae*, §§pref., 25, epi.
[201] *Ibid*., §§1, 4-5, 7-8, 15-16, 18-19. Otherwise, the focus of Cogitosus seems to be in crafting the image of Kildare with urban and suburban imagery that the agricultural miracles build towards: the most significant is the story describing the church door (§32); see Carol Neuman de Vegvar, 'Romanitas and Realpolitik in Cogitosus' Description of the Church of St Brigit, Kildare', in Martin Carver (ed.), *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 153-70; Lisa Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 137-62. More recently, this Romanist urbanising has been seen in terms of a 'symbolic meditation', more to do with imagining the temple of Jerusalem built in Ireland: Elizabeth Krajewski, 'Kildare and the Kingdom of God: A Reading of Cogitosus' *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*', *Peritia*, 28 (2017), pp. 91-112.

with a layman and his wife setting foot on his island retreat.[202] Muirchú used the Irish sea, which he called in classical style '*mari nostro*', to open the text. This was a vivid metaphor he borrowed from Cogitosus to describe the task of writing hagiography: like taking a small boy's paddleboat on the 'deep' and 'perilous' sea.[203] Muirchú also described Patrick's voyages to and from a series of named ports, up and down the east coast of Ireland, as well as his voyages as a young man.[204] Much like the *Life of Germanus* however, the ocean space lacks character in these episodes. For example, the wind was mentioned in these journeys on three occasions, but in two of these, the wind was discussed to simply say no issues were encountered and that sailing was swift.[205] Patrick's own account of his travels similarly lacked any such detail or reflection.[206] The third episode in Muirchú's *Life* mentioning wind and the sea is the story of Patrick sending adrift a man who tried to kill the saint. This episode is crucial for grasping how Iona's monks understood the ocean.

> And Patrick said: 'I cannot judge, but God will judge. You must go down now to the sea unarmed and leave this part of Ireland without delay [...] and place yourself in a boat of one hide, without a rudder and without a paddle, and be prepared to go wherever the wind and the sea shall carry you, and live wherever you land by Divine Providence and practise there the divine commandments'.[207]

This is the key narrative instance where the legal punishment of 'sending adrift', ocean exile, is described. It has long been suggested that this punishment of ocean exile, where God decided your fate, was introduced during the Christian conversion

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[202] *Vita Prima S. Brigitae*, §§72.1-11; 73.1-5; *cf. VC*, §i.22.
[203] Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, §§pref.2, i.1; Cogitosus, *Vita Brigitae*, §epi.
[204] Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, §§i.1, i.2, i.6(5), i.9(8), i.11(10), i.14(13).
[205] *Ibid*., §§i.9(8), i.14(13).
[206] Patrick, *Confessio*, ed. and trans. D.R. Howlett, *The Book of Letters of Saint Patrick the Bishop* (Dublin, 1994), §§1, 18-19, 23.
[207] Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, §i.23(22): *Et ait Patricius: 'Non possum iudicare, sed Deus iudicabit. Tu tamen egredire nunc inermis ad mare et transi velociter de regione hac Hibernensi* […] *et mitte te in navim unius pellis absque gubernaculo et absque remo, et quocumque te duxerit ventus et mare esto paratus et terram in quamcumque defferat te divina providentia inhabita et exerce ibi divina mandata'*.

of Ireland for ecclesiasts to avoid issuing the death penalty; Adomnán also issued this punishment for women who committed crimes that in other circumstances would result in a death sentence.[208] As discussed above, Columba's ocean voyage to Iona purposely invoked this legal and religious context.

If the category of analysis is broadened to include other depictions of nature in these Irish hagiographies, then the *Bethu Brigte* does offer one notable parallel to how Iona's monks viewed their ocean environment. In the final story in this hagiography, Brigit went out into a lightning-storm when no other nun would tend to the sheep. There she sang a verse asking God to clear the weather for her:

> Grant me a clear day [...]
> ward off rain, ward off wind
>
> My King will do this for me,
> There shall truly be no rain till the night,
> because of Brigit today,
> who is setting out for the herding.[209]

This recalls the Ionan poem *Noli Pater* where the poet appealed to God, more in fear than in confidence, to calm the harsh natural world:

> Father, do not allow thunder and lightning,
> Lest we be shattered by its fear and its fire.
>
> We fear you, O terrible God, believing there is no one like you.
> All songs praise you throughout the angelic host.[210]

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[208] *Cáin Adomnáin*, §45; Mary E. Byrne, 'On the Punishment of Sending Adrift', *Ériu*, 11 (1932), pp. 97-102.

[209] *Bethu Brigte*, §46:
> *Rom-bith laithi solus lat,* […]
> *aurgair flechud, aurgair gaith*
>
> *Do-gena dam-sa mo rí,*
> *ní firfe flechud choidchí,*
> *fo bithin Brigti indiu*
> *teti sund dond ingariu*.

[210] *Noli Pater*, ll. 1-4, see also above, n. 121:
> *Te timemus terribilem nullum credentes similem*
> *te cuncta canunt carmina angelorum per agmina*.

Rather than more harmonious examples of Celtic Nature poetry, these poems pleaded for control over the natural world that only the saints and God could offer.[211] I have argued above that the Ionan poems may have been tools employed to inspire hope and strengthen resolve in the face of environmental chaos.[212] Clare Stancliffe has noted the particular interest of the Brigitine *Lives* in 'helping miracles': these included acts like clearing storms, but also miracles where Brigit used her power for agricultural gain.[213] The first chapter of this thesis discusses how Columba's miracles of agricultural and environmental patronage reflected the close relationship between the monastery's sustainability concerns and those of surrounding communities.[214] These miracles and the Brigitine accounts contrast the weakness of man against the might of nature, with saints having the ability to communicate human fragility to God in order to gain control over the environmental circumstances of Iona and Kildare. Iona's surroundings in contrast to Kildare's were dominated by the ocean, so while both miracle collections were doing similar things, they responded differently to their respective environments. The Ionan canon of literature answered the needs of their ocean environment, extending Columba's patronage and God's protection from

[211] *Cf*. Low, 'The Natural World in Early Irish Christianity', pp. 169-203, 170 n. 4; see also above, n. 122. Donnchadh Ó Corráin has argued convincingly that this harmonic nature poetry was largely the production of metropolitan monastic centres, where nature could be idealised from afar: Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish Hermit Poetry?', pp. 261-4; see also, Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Early Gaelic Nature Poetry Revisited', in Georgia Henley, Paul Russell, with Joseph F. Eska (eds.), *Rhetoric and Reality in Medieval Celtic Literature. Studies in Honor of Daniel F. Melia* (Hamilton NY, 2014), pp. 8-12; and Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Invention of Celtic Nature Poetry', in Terence Brown (ed.), *Celticism* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 97-124. Similar to how Ó Corráin has argued to separate the poetic voice from the poet's reality, I think it is fair to question my own assumption that Ionan poetry and literature reflected a personal engagement with the sea, at least to the extent that I have.

[212] See above, pp. 168-70.

[213] Clare Stancliffe, 'The Miracle Stories in Seventh-Century Irish saints' Lives', in Jacques Fontaine and J.N. Hillgarth (eds.), *Le Septième Siècle: Changements et Continuités: Actes du Colloque Bilateral Franco-Brittanique Tenu au Warburg Institute les 8-9 Juillet 1988* (London, 1992), pp. 95, 98-9.

[214] See above, Chapter One, pp. 75-83.

agricultural miracles to the protection of sailors and providing helpful winds for journeys.[215]

A key piece of insular literature where the ocean environment is meaningfully discussed for comparison with the Ionan canon is the *Voyage of St Brendan*. This voyage-tale was probably written by an Irish monk in the late eighth century.[216] In this story St Brendan of Clonfert journeyed into the Atlantic with seventeen companions hoping to find 'the Promised Land of Saints'.[217] Brendan was a contemporary of St Columba, and, according to Adomnán, he also voyaged to visit Columba on Hinba.[218] Travelling for seven years, St Brendan came across a series of islands hosting different animals, communities, and marvellous phenomena, even an island that was itself a giant fish.[219] This was a deeply eschatological story concerned with both salvation and damnation, and the allegorical voyage of monastic life towards heaven and avoiding hell.[220] It is a text closely related to the Early Irish genre of *Immrama*, literally 'rowings about': 'frame-tales' where ocean voyagers come across various fantastical islands.[221] Voyagers in these traditional Irish stories had similar encounters to those seen in the *Voyage of Brendan* including visions of paradise, often contrasted with damnation.[222] The account of hell and its

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[215] *VC*, §§i.5, ii.12, ii.15, ii.42, ii.45; see also above, Chapter One, pp. 75-83.
[216] For a dating of this text to eighth century Ireland, see above, Chapter Two, p. 88 n. 14.
[217] *Navigatio S. Brendani*, §§1-2.
[218] *AU*, §577.3; *VC*, §iii.17.
[219] *Navigatio S. Brendani*, §10.
[220] Dorothy Ann Bray, 'Allegory in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*', *Viator*, 26 (1995), pp. 1-10; James F. Kenney, 'The Legend of St. Brendan', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 14 (1920), pp. 61-2; Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Distant Islands: the Topography of Holiness in the *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*', in Marion Glasscoe (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition, England, Ireland and Wales: Exeter Symposium VI, Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 1999* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 16-17.
[221] Barbara Hillers, 'Voyages Between Heaven and Hell: Navigating the Early Irish *Immram* Tales', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 13 (1993), pp. 66-7; Dumville, '*Echtrae* and *Imram*: Some Problems of Definition', pp. 74-5.
[222] *Echtrae Chonnlai*, ed. Kim McCone, *Echtrae Chonnlai, and the Beginnings of Vernacular Narrative Writing in Ireland: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Notes, Bibliography and Vocabulary* (Maynooth, 2000), §§3, 5, 14-15; *Immram Brain*, ed. A.G. van Hamel, *Immrama* (Dublin, 1941), §§61-2; *Immram Maíle Dúin*, ed. van Hamel, *Immrama*, §32; *Immram Snédgusa ocus Maic Riagla*, prose: §§4, 7, verse: §§25-8, 44-66; *Immram Úa Corra*, ed. van Hamel, *Immrama*, ll. 78-94.

surroundings in the *Voyage of St Brendan* is striking. Brendan and his companions were sailing northward after encountering an island of smiths and forges when they saw a smoking island volcano.[223] The saint had warned his sailors in their approach to this island that they had entered 'hell's marches'. [224] Upon reaching the coal-black mountain, one of Brendan's sailors who jumped from the boat onto the island was snatched by demons:

> The brethren immediately piloted the boat back from the land and cried out to the Lord saying: 'Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us!'. The venerable father with his companions watched on as that pitiable brother was carried up by a great number of demons to be tortured and as he was set on fire among them.[225]

Sailing away from the island they encountered Judas imprisoned on a small rock in the ocean nearby who explained to them that this volcano was the home of Leviathan.[226] Brendan and his sailors were lucky to meet Judas because it was a Sunday, when he was given some reprieve from his tortures. Otherwise, he was joined in the depths of hell by Herod, Pilate, Annas, Caiaphas, and now one of Brendan's sailors. The saint sailed into the ocean to find a heavenly paradise, but he also discovered there the fate of those who broke with their pilgrimage.

Adomnán preserved accounts of Ionan monks setting off into the unknown ocean to seek a 'desert in the sea': a monastic retreat like that founded by Columba on Iona.[227] The most famous of these voyages was the third journey of Cormac Ua Liatháin, which in many ways appears as a miniature *immrama* in the middle of the

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[223] *Navigatio S. Brendani*, §§23-4.
[224] *Navigatio S. Brendani*, §23: *'quia sumus in confinibus infernorum*'.
[225] *Navigatio S. Brendani*, §24: *Fratres confestim navim retro a terra ducebant et clamabant ad Dominum dicentes: 'Miserere nobis, Domine, miserere nobis!'. At vero venerabilis pater cum suis sociis aspiciebat quomodo ducebatur infelix a multitudine daemonum ad tormenta et quomodo incendebatur inter illos*.
[226] *Navigatio S. Brendani*, §25.
[227] *VC*, §§i.6, i.20, ii.42.

*Life*.[228] The *immrama* developed at least in dialogue with these stories of clerical voyages.[229] Cormac had already attempted to find a retreat in ocean twice previously. The voyage landing Cormac in Orkney has been discussed above,[230] but the first attempt was a failure because one of his crew was a monk that had left without his abbot's permission.[231] In his third voyage Cormac travelled into the ocean 'beyond the range of human exploration, and from where no one could return'.[232] They had sailed northwards for fourteen days and nights,

> It came about that, after the tenth hour of that fourteenth day, there arose all around them some truly terrifying and almost unbearable terrors. Never seen until that time, foul and exceedingly dangerous little creatures covering the sea attacked. They quickly beat strong and fearful blows against the hull, the flanks, the stern, and the prow such that it was thought the hide covering of the boat would be pierced.[233]

These creatures were about the size of frogs with sharp snouts that also ate through the oars, but there were 'other monsters' too that Adomnán does not name. Jacqueline Borsje has argued that these were demonic creatures like those seen by Brendan and his monks, and that Cormac had likewise entered the ocean domain of hell, an 'infernal' zone.[234] With no prospect of rescue, Cormac and his monks turned

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[228] *VC*, §ii.42.
[229] William Flint Thrall, 'Clerical Sea Pilgrimages and the *Imrama*', first published in *The Manly Anniversary Studies in Language and Literature* (Chicago IL, 1923), pp. 276-83, repr. in Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage*, pp. 15-21. For a hardline vision of primarily Christian influence, see McCone, *Echtrae Chonnlai*, pp. 95-9; for a summary of the debate, see Jonathan Wooding, 'The Location of the Promised Land in Hiberno-Latin Literature', in Jacqueline Borsje *et al*. (eds.), *Celtic Cosmology: Perspectives from Ireland and Scotland* (Toronto ON, 2014), pp. 93-6, nn. 2-5.
[230] See above, Chapter Two, p. 117.
[231] *VC*, §i.6. This was a trope common to other *immrama* and the *Voyage of Brendan*, where improper voyagers had to be left behind or die for the voyage to be successful: *Immram Maíle Dúin*, §§pref., 1, 11, 15, 31; *Immram Úa Corra*, §§45-6, 48; *Navigatio S. Brendani*, §§5, 7, 17, 24.
[232] *VC*, §ii.42.
[233] *VC*, §ii.42: *Unde contigit ut post decimam eiusdem quarti et decimi horam diei, quidam pene insustentabiles undique et valde formidabiles consurgerent terrores. Quaedam quippe usque in id temporis invisae mare obtegentes occurrerant tetrae et infestae nimis bestiolae, quae horribili impetu carinam et latera pupimque et proram ita forti feriebant percusura, ut pellicium tectum navis penetrales putarentur penetrare posse.*
[234] Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, pp. 163-4.

to prayer. Columba, having had a vision of Cormac and his crew, called on all of Iona's monks to do the same:

> 'Brothers, pray with all your effort for Cormac[,] in our minds we must share in the sufferings of our brothers, our family, placed in unbearable danger, and pray with them to the Lord'.[235]

It took all their prayers to beseech God and bring these sailors back to Iona. The story ends with an evocation of Jesus calming the storm on the sea of Galilee to wonder at the power of Columba: here was a saint that could command both the 'winds and the ocean' and save voyagers even in the Devil's domain.[236]

Mary Byrne has argued that the *immrama* grew out of the Irish imagination, as people contemplated the potential journeys of those sentenced to be 'set adrift' on the sea.[237] The punishment of sending adrift was seen as equivalent to a death sentence because the ocean was an environment where God's judgement alone could decide your fate. As Muirchú put it: '"I cannot judge, but God will judge"'.[238] The ocean was an environment of God's judgement, a kind of proxy for Doomsday: the ocean gave them up to God as if they were dead, so that their deeds could be judged.[239] St Brendan and his crew saw both the avenues available to their souls: paradise and hell, salvation and damnation. This was a text that meditated on the kind of monastic life judged by God as necessary to achieve one and avoid the other. Along the way they encountered islands and islanders awaiting the final Day of Judgement.[240] These ideas appear prominently in all the *immrama*. In the *Voyage of Máel Dúin* the sailors encountered spirits in the form of birds awaiting Doomsday.

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[235] *VC*, §ii.42: *'Fratres, tota intentione pro Cormaco orate*[,] *nostris commembribus in periculo intollerabili constitutis mente conpati debemus fratribus, et dominum exorare cum eis'*.
[236] *VC*, §ii.42.
[237] Byrne, 'On the Punishment of Sending Adrift', pp. 101-2; Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, §i.23(22).
[238] Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, §i.23(22).
[239] Rev. 20:12-13.
[240] *Navigatio S. Brendani*, §§12, 25-6.

Despite Máel Dúin sailing to seek revenge for the murder of his father, he was convinced to forgive the murderers, because despite being a man deserving of death himself God had saved him from the dangers of the ocean.[241] Similarly, in the *Voyage of the Úa Corra*, a band of raiders set out into the ocean seeking forgiveness for their crimes after one of them had a vision of damnation.[242] In the *Voyage of Snédgus and Mac Riagla*, a ninth century *immram* produced by the Columban *familia*, two monks of Iona were told of Judgement Day in vivid detail.[243] The very context of Snédgus and mac Riagla's voyage was that these two monks set out voluntary into ocean exile after Columba had sentenced sixty couples to be sent adrift. The couples were duly discovered in the ocean awaiting God's judgement.

I have argued above that Columba's exile into the ocean was a kind of martyrdom, a mock passion, because it mimicked the punishment of the most serious crimes known to Irish society. If one was sent adrift, and if God judged you favourably, you might arrive on strange shores where you could experience a kind of rebirth: you lost all your familial ties, status, and allies; you had to exist as a person with no history, and by living penitently you might yet achieve a place in the kingdom of heaven. Thomas Owen Clancy has described the culture of the *immrama* as viewing the ocean as a similarly 'purgative' environment, where one's sins might be expunged from God's book.[244] Iona's monks shared this legal and literary culture, and they took on this renunciation, rebirth, and judgement voluntarily. Put in their own Ionan words, by 'crucifying yourself on the blue waves', a monk not only

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[241] *Immram Maíle Dúin*, §§19, 33.
[242] *Immram Úa Corra*, ll. 78-94.
[243] *Voyage of Snédgus and Mac Riagla,* prose, §§4, 7, verse, §§25-8, 44-66.
[244] Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Subversion at Sea: Structure, Style and Intent in the *Immrama*', in Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage*, pp. 194-203, 206, 225; see also, Mulligan, *A Landscape of Words*, pp. 56-8.

experienced a kind of passion, a kind of death, but he was also baptised into a new holy way of life.

> Know you not that all we who are baptised in Christ Jesus are baptised in his death? For we are buried together with him by baptism into death; that Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life.[245]

Crucially, the new way of life that these monks would walk was modelled by Columba: the first of them to undergo an ocean passion and prove by his holiness that his boat was the path to salvation.

## Conclusion

If the Irish legal tradition of sending adrift saw the ocean as the realm where God's sentence on one's sinfulness or holiness could be seen, then the monks of Iona were judged daily. Columba had been the judged a saint who embodied the imitation of Christ in this process. By following in the wake of Columba, by entering the ocean, these monks felt they were also following in the footsteps of Christ. In crucifying themselves on the 'blue waves', as Columba had done, the monks of Iona could gain sanctification, martyrdom, and become Christ-like. The ocean was their environment for Christo-mimesis, via the imitation of Columba.[246] However, if

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[245] Rom. 6:3-4.

[246] The power of mimesis (imitation or representation) in drama, play, and narrative to shape someone's character goes back to Aristotle and Plato: Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford, 2013), pp. 19-21 (1448a1-1449a5); Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford, 1998), pp. 87-95 (§§392d-398b). Irish texts such as the *Cattle Raid of Cooley* (*Táin bó Cuailnge*) could use mimetic-narrative techniques to shift the political sympathies of the audience: Hildegard L.C. Tristram, 'Mimesis and Diegesis in the *Cattle Raid of Cuailnge*', in Carey, Kock, and Lambert (eds.), *Ildánach Ildírech*, pp. 263-76; see also, N.B. Aitchison, 'The Ulster Cycle: Heroic Image and Historical Reality', *Journal of Medieval History*, 13:2 (1987), pp. 87-116, esp. 103-12.

Mimesis could occur at multiple levels of narrative (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, rev 2nd edn (London, 2004), pp. 115-24; Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (3 vols, Chicago IL, 1984-1988), i, pp. 52-77). This can be seen in the simple Ionan statement that Columba 'crucified his body on the blue waves'. Beccán mac Luigdech had a preunderstanding that Columba's ocean voyage was a form of crucifixion, and that both he and Columba were living in the imitation of Christ: recalling these ideas, inserting them in his poem, was a form of mental mimesis. Furthermore, by placing this image

Iona's monks could look to Columba as a saintly model for their own ocean exile voyaging, and as proof of God's favourable judgement towards their life and mission, they could also recall their brethren who drowned, and recollect those moments in ocean storms when they themselves questioned their faith. The idyllic view of nature in some Irish 'hermit' poetry arguably came from the ability to see nature from afar, avoiding its harsh realities in 'sybaritic enjoyment'.[247] The poetry of Iona, seeking protection from the elements, and pleading that Columba and God deliver their souls to heaven should they die, spoke to a deep anxiety, in the chaos of the ocean, about whether they were really guided by providence and living in the image of Christ. These monks were true ocean-hermits, producing literature that reflected a year-round and daily contest with the ocean and its terrors.

This view of the ocean is demonstrated in one example when the monk and future abbot Baithéne confronted the whale off the coast of Iona. An impetuous monk had set out earlier, disobeying his abbot Columba, and was driven back to the isle. Baithéne, a future saint, was an example like Columba to inspire faith in God's providential guidance, and who could overcome the very natural fear of the ocean's dangers. This story also shows how the interactions of Iona's monks within their seascape could become layered with meaning. One layer was a lesson on monastic hierarchy, showing that proper obedience to one's abbot should always be upheld, the only overriding obedience being to the Lord and His plan for you and for

in his poem, Beccán represented (mimesis again) Columba's ocean voyage as embodying Christ's passion, and the poet contextualises this act of imitation in the story of the poem. Whoever received this image, by reading the poem or hearing it read aloud, entered into the process of imitation, of mimesis, through analysing these images, understanding them in the context of their own world, and by relating it to their own life.

[247] Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish Hermit Poetry?', pp. 257-64. It has, however, been rightly noted that those 'who live in a landscape can still, in poetry, romanticise that landscape': Thomas Owen Clancy, '*Tír, Tráig, Tuile* | Land, Strand and Tide: Colum Cille and the Poetics of Place', in Evemalm-Graham, with Clancy and Márkus (eds.), *Ì Chaluim Chille*, p. 450.

creation.[248] Yet as discussed in a previous chapter, this story may have also been a lesson regarding the real ocean dangers of Iona's ultra-local archipelago.[249] What is most apparent in how the ocean is depicted in the *Life of Columba* is this attention taken by Adomnán to make the seaways lived spaces where such expositions, both theological and practical, could take place. The ocean was not just a stage for miracles, it was a geography, both sacred and functional, integrated into the daily lives of Iona's monks. This is the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes the Ionan perspective on its ocean surroundings from many of its potential influences. What are passing asides to the ocean in other accounts, became layered images in the literature of Iona, and reflected the diverse yet simultaneous meanings they gained from their seascape.

This is best seen by returning to the appearance of the *navis crucis* image in the *Life of Columba*. When Adomnán ordered his monks to raise the sailyard in the manner of the cross, he was carrying out a basic task needed for an island monastery with no close access to materials and resources: retrieving timber for use in construction and repairs.[250] This link to the specific ocean environment around Iona took the *navis crucis* image and turned it from a metaphor for the Christian life into the reality of life as a monk of Iona. The ocean made life on Iona difficult, but that harsh environment made a monastic life lived amidst the ocean even more valuable and Christ-like. Adomnán was not just dealing in metaphor in this episode, he saw Christ's passion unified into his daily experience of the ocean. He shared this experience with his fellow Ionan monks. It has been recently argued that the island and monastery of Iona was remodelled to reflect the layout of the Church of the Holy

[248] Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, pp. 326-28.
[249] See Chapter Two.
[250] *VC*, §ii.45.

Sepulchre in Jerusalem.[251] This would make Adomnán's journey back to Iona from gathering timber, a true mirror of the *navis crucis* image set out by Augustine: setting out into the ocean, buffeted by storms, but guided by the winds sent by St Columba, and sailing home to the New Jerusalem; or rather, the monastic vehicle to achieve that holy kingdom, now founded in the Hebrides. In terms of audience, this combination of image, ocean, and archaeology may have only been recognised by historians and the monks of Iona's *familia*. This suggests that the corpus of Ionan literature was aimed directly at the Columban *familia*, and it represented the distinct spiritual view the entire *familia* had towards the ocean and the natural world. What the monks were reading certainly impacted how they saw the ocean, but it seems that these influences were subordinate to the Ionan writers reflecting the sea of their daily lives, 'rowing through the storm, infinite in this world'.

[251] Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem "At the Ends of the Earth"', pp. 33-85.

# CHAPTER FOUR

*Iona and the Ocean in Comparison*

> From the course of the sea, Capraria now raises itself;
> the island is encrusted with many men who shun the light.
> They call themselves by the Greek name monk (*monachos*)
> because they wish to live alone, seen by no one.
> They fear the burdens of prosperity, while revering the loss of it:
> whoever could, of one's own accord, live pitiably lest they be pitiful?
> What simple minds of mad perversion,
> while able to endure the fears of punishment, cannot endure any reward?
> Be they convicts demanding the punishments of their deeds,
> or that their miserable flesh is swollen with black bile.[1]

Reflecting on his voyage home to Gaul in AD 417, Rutilius Namatianus offers an early view of island monasticism all the more valuable for the negative outlook provided by a still-pagan Roman aristocrat.[2] This is one of two passages in his *On Returning* that criticise the practice of Christian asceticism on islands.[3] The imagery of convicts and punishments used in the poem captured the fact that Mediterranean islands were sites for punitive exile in classical antiquity and remained so within a generation of these islands being filled with monks.[4] This penal context was also the early Christian relationship with island environments, even being associated with a

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[1] Rutilius Namatianus, *De Reditu Suo*, ed. Charles Haines Keene, trans. George F. Savage-Armstrong, *Rutilii Claudii Namatiani De Reditu Suo Libri Duo* (London, 1907), §i.439-448; *id*., trans. Martha Malamud, *Rutulius Namatianus' Going Home: De Reditu Suo* (Abingdon, 2016):

> *Processu pelagi iam se Capraria tollit;*
> *Squalet lucifugis insula plena viris.*
> *Ipsi se monachos Graio cognomine dicunt,*
> *Quod soli nullo viuere teste volunt.*
> *Munera fortunae metuunt, dum damna verentur:*
> *Quisquam sponte miser, ne miser esse queat?*
> *Quaenam perversi rabies tam stulta cerebri,*
> *Dum mala formides, nec bona posse pati?*
> *Sive suas repetunt factorum ergastula poenas,*
> *Tristia seu nigro viscera felle tument.*

[2] For the dating of Namatianus' poem, see Alan Cameron, 'Rutilius Namatianus, St Augustine, and the Date of the *De Reditu*', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 57:1 (1967), pp. 31-9; see also his overview in *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 207-18.

[3] Rutilius Namatianus, *De Reditu Suo*, §i.515-526.

[4] Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum Gestarum*, ed. Wolfgang Seyfarth (2 vols, Stuttgart, 1978), i-ii, §§22.3.6, 28.1.23; Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum*, *Divus Augustus*, §65.1-65.4.

kind of living martyrdom: it was in exile on the island of Patmos that John experienced his vision of the apocalypse and it was in (probably) punitive exile on the island of Gallinara in AD 358 – 360 that St Martin attempted the first recorded example of island asceticism.[5] Placing a Christian on an island put them at a safe distance from the rest of society; this became their precise desire. Namatianus castigated the monks of Capraria and a young Gallo-Roman on Gorgana, whose 'superstitious exile' led him to a 'living death', because they renounced familial prestige, wealth, and offices. These were exactly the actions that Jerome praised in his friend Bonosus which would allow him to climb Jacob's ladder into heaven from his own island retreat.[6] These same themes were crucial to the Ionan understanding of the ocean.[7]

The first recorded island monk, St Martin of Tours, seems to have been exiled to the island of Gallinara in the Ligurian sea by the Homoian Auxentius, the Bishop of Milan, after trying to found a monastery in that city.[8] Retreating to an island was an opportunity to avoid the persecutions and conflicts that were tearing the institutional Church apart, while also providing Martin the opportunity to practise

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[5] Rev. 1:9; Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, §6; see also, Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, trans. Emily Joseph Daly, *Tertullian: Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix Octavius*, FC 10 (Washington DC, 1950), §§1.7, 37.4. St Augustine dismissed island martyrdom or exile when taken up by Donatists and Manicheans: *Contra Epistulam Parmeniani*, PL 43 (1841), §i.8; *Contra Faustus*, PL 42 (1841), §v.8. He does however praise the mission of island monasteries in a letter to those very monks of Capraria spoken of by Rutilius: *Epistulae*, PL 33 (1841), §48; *id*., trans. Robert Eno and Wilfrid Parsons, *Saint Augustine: Letters*, FC 12, 18, 20, 30, 32, 81 (New York NY, Washington DC, 1951, 1953, 1955, 1956, 1989), 12, §48. These early links are discussed in Anne-Marie Helvétius, 'Les Premières Îles Monastiques de la Gaule', in Gabriela Signori (ed.), *Inselklöster – Klosterinseln: Topographie und Toponymie einer Monastichen Formation* (Berlin, 2019), pp. 14-15; and Alain Dubreucq, 'Le Monachisme Insulaire Armoricain d'Apres les Textes Hagiographiques', in Miljenko Jurković (ed.), *Le Monachisme Insulaire du IV^e^ à la Fin du XI^e^ Siècle*, *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, 19 (2013), pp. 35-46.

[6] Jerome, *Epistulae*, §3.4-5; Rutilius Namatianus, *De Reditu Suo*, §i.512-526.

[7] See above, Chapter Three, pp. 147-50, 153-7.

[8] Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, §6. For the distinction between Arianism and Homoianism and the specific confession of Auxentius see Uta Heil, 'The Homoians', in Guido M. Berndt and Roland Steinacher (eds.), *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed* (Farnham, 2014), pp. 85-115, esp. 99-102.

extreme asceticism, as he did for the first time in his monastic career.[9] The value of island environments to avoid not only ecclesiastical, but also political conflict was repeated by St Ambrose in his *Hexameron*, where islands are places to avoid the 'fury of the barbarian', 'a refuge in a time of danger', and for 'men in trouble, a place of escape'.[10] Certainly one reason Rutilius Namatianus was so disgusted with the development of island monasticism, especially as a home for aristocrats who would otherwise have taken military or political office, was the intrusion of barbarians into the empire and the collapse of the Roman military machine: these monks were shirking their duty of driving these barbarians back.[11] The advent of island monasticism at this time has been directly linked to the incursions into Gaul and North Africa of the Arian Goths and Vandals who, by persecuting Trinitarian Christians, led the first island monks to seek out small and desolate retreats.[12] Islands, particularly those that were more physically removed and economically insignificant, became even more desirable for those early monks seeking to avoid the world spiritually as well as its very real dangers and chaos.[13] The 'spiritual imperatives of worldly separation', and their introduction into the Christian West, were the more significant drivers of early island monasticism, and were the more foundational attitude that should be discussed, but the potential political contexts

[9] Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, §6: Martin survived on this island by only consuming the roots of plants, some of which were poisonous (hellebore).
[10] Ambrose, *Hexameron*, trans. John J. Savage, *Saint Ambrose: Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, FC 42 (Washington DC, 1961), §iii.5.
[11] His attitude against island asceticism was probably shared even by many established Christians as well: Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, pp. 207-18; Rutilius Namatianus, *De Reditu Suo*, §§i.515-26.
[12] Frerich Schön, 'Isolation as Resource for an Island Community in the Strait of Sicily: The Case of Linosa Island (Italy) in Late Antiquity', in Sandra Teuber *et al*. (eds.), *Waters: Conference Proceedings for 'Waters as a Resource' of the SFB 1070 ResourceCultures and DEGUWA (Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Unterwasserarchäologie e.V.)* (Tübingen, 2020), pp. 57-8; G.P. Brogiolo and M. Ibsen, 'Eremitic Settlements and Political and Military Contingencies in the Sixth Century: The Case of the *Alto Garda Bresciano* (Lake Garda, N. Italy)', in Hendrik Dey and Elizabeth Fentress (eds.), *Western Monasticism Ante Litteram: The Spaces of Monastic Observance in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 213-14.
[13] Schön, 'Isolation as Resource for an Island Community', p. 58.

should not be ignored. These too may have led these early monks, but also Columba, to seek out island environments to found their monasteries: 'if conditions for safety happened to coincide with conditions for solitude, so much the better'.[14]

Ascetic charismatics like St Martin set the trend for choosing island environments for acting out holy Christian lives, but he and the inhabitants of Gorgana and Capraria were sailing to these islands in the aftermath of St Antony's journey into the Egyptian desert.[15] Antony was the model for spiritual perfection. He showed that immense holiness and divine grace, previously only revealed in the Christian martyrs, could be obtained in the desert and through personal ascetic practice without losing one's life: he became 'daily a martyr to his conscience'.[16] His fame established the desert as the principal environment where one could achieve sanctity, but in the Western Empire, where no deserts were readily available, this created problems for those Christians who wished to follow in Anthony's footsteps. Many travelled to the East to gain the wisdom of the desert, and this became a rhetorical tool for many returning westwards to argue for their greater spiritual authority.[17] Sulpicius Severus, Martin's hagiographer, confronted these arguments head-on by showing that the same divine powers and miracles attributed to Antony

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[14] A.T. Lucas, 'The Plundering and Burning of Churches in Ireland, 7th to 16th Century', in Etienne Rynne (ed.), *North Munster Studies: Essays in Commemoration of Monsignor Michael Moloney* (Limerick, 1967), p. 208; Brogiolo and Ibsen, 'Eremitic Settlements and Political and Military Contingencies', pp. 213-14.

[15] James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg PA, 1999), p. 42: 'it is where many historians begin their presentation of Egyptian monasticism'. For an overview of the new historiography surrounding Antony's journey see David Brakke, 'Holy Men and Women of the Desert', in Bernice Kaczynski (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Monasticism* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 35-45.

[16] Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, §§46-7; R.A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 69-72.

[17] Jerome is one of the most vocal examples of westerners leaving for the eastern desert to engage with its ascetic ideals. The most famous descriptions are in his epistles: *Epistulae*, §§22.7, 22.34-6. For a summary of his time in the desert see J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London, 1975), pp. 46-56. Conrad Leyser, 'The Uses of the Desert in the Sixth-Century West', in Jitse Dijkstra and Han van Dijk (eds.), *The Encroaching Desert: Egyptian Hagiography and the Medieval West* (Leiden, 2006), pp. 114-15; Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 79-95, 99-106.

occurred in the life of Martin, proving that the desert was not the only location where sanctity could be revealed.[18] Martin not only showed his saintly credentials through his miracles, but also in his best attempt to recreate the desert ideal of worldly and spiritual separation. He founded a semi-island monastery away from the crowd, where no goods were to be bought or sold and everything was to be held in common. It was shut in by the River Loire on one side and a 'mountain' on the other (quite an exaggeration).[19] Columba's foundation of Iona sits within this same tradition of building a monastery that captures the spiritual and physical ideals of deserts when none were available. In the very language of Columban monasticism, the ocean, and the islands within it, became their desert: the Ionan monk Báitán 'rowed out searching for a desert in the sea'; so did the monk Cormac who on three occasions sought a 'desert in the ocean'.[20] Islands and the sea could in fact be very like the desert, they similarly provided the Ionan monks with an 'ecological frontier' between 'there' and 'here', between the monastery and the 'world', broadly defined, that lay beyond the shoreline.[21] The 'world' was often metaphorically understood as the sea.[22]

These two monastic ideals of physical and worldly separation were crucial to the history of island monasticism from its very beginnings. Early medieval Iona was part of this long history, but its relationship to the ocean and to these two ideals made

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[18] Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church*, pp. 143-7; Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogi*, ed. and trans. Jacques Fontaine, *Sulpice Sévère: Gallus: Dialogues sur les «Vertus» de Saint Martin*, SC 510 (2006), §i.24. The best introduction to Martin and his hagiographer remains Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford, 1983).
[19] Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, §10.
[20] *VC*, §§i.6, i.20, ii.42.
[21] James E. Goehring, 'The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert', in Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (eds.), *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (Durham NC, 2005), pp. 138-9; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York NY, 1988), pp. 215-17.
[22] See above, Chapter Three, p. 176.

it distinct. By comparing the Hebridean community to late antique, Irish, and British parallels, this becomes clear.

Lérins

About four kilometres off the coast from the city of Cannes in the south of France are two islands.[23] The larger of the two, called Sainte-Marguerite today, was known as *Lero* or *Lerona* in Antiquity. The smaller of the two, Saint-Honorat, at about fifteen-hundred metres across and seven hundred metres wide was *Lerino* or *Lerina*.[24] The latter, named after St Honoratus, was home to the principal monastery that he established at the beginning of the fifth century known to most as Lérins, 'the first outpost of desert monasticism in the Latin West'.[25] As discussed already, Lérins was not the first island monastery that exemplified the ideals of the Egyptian desert.[26] Lérins was however the most significant community to articulate these

[23] Marc-Denise Valentin, *Hilaire d'Arles: Vie de Saint Honorat*, SC 235 (1977), p. 108, n. 1. For reference, the Sound of Iona is about two kilometres across.
[24] *Ibid*. Both islands are mentioned by Pliny (*Historia Naturalis*, §3.79) and Strabo (*Geographica*, §4.1.10). Iona in comparison is five-and-a-half kilometres long and two-and-a-half kilometres wide.
[25] Albrecht Diem, 'Lérins (Lerinum)', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2018), https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662778.001.0001/acref-9780198662778-e-2772 (6 Jun. 2025); Valentin, *Hilaire d'Arles: Vie de Honorat*, pp. 21-2.
[26] This statement of Diem's reflects the attitude among some historians that see the holiness of Martin and the ascetics of Gorgana and Capraria as based on the miraculous and charismatic nature of their lives compared to the more refined 'Rhone monasticism' cultivated and exported by Lérins, one that was more in touch with both Roman culture and the writings of the desert: Friedrich Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich: Kultur und Gesellschaft in Gallien, den Rheinlanden und Bayern am Beispiel der Monastischen Entwicklung* (Darmstadt, 1988), pp. 452-61; William Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 2-3.
This dichotomy between Tours and Lérins has been criticised however: see esp. Conrad Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 41-3, n. 31; Jacques Fontaine, 'L'Ascétisme Chrétien dans la Littérature Gallo-Romaine d'Hilaire à Cassien', in Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, *Atti del Colloquio sul Tema: La Gallia Romana (Roma, 10-11 maggio 1971)* (Rome, 1973), pp. 98-115; J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Review: *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*', *English Historical Review*, 83, no. 327 (1968), pp. 370-1. This contrast between 'rough' and 'smooth' styles may go back to scripture and the contrast between Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:25-34) and has some basis in human anthropology and social organisation: Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (Abingdon, 2003), pp. 99-103. I am indebted to Conrad Leyser for these references.

ideals in a body of writing, and to implant its monastic and ascetic values onto the Western Church, particularly in Gaul: R.A. Markus's 'ascetic invasion'.[27] Key Lerinian authors such as Hilary of Arles, Eucherius of Lyon, and Faustus of Riez, developed the ascetic ideals that came to be so influential in the Western Church, as well as the relationship those ideals had with the island environment of Lérins. Lérins had a long afterlife beyond this period, being re-founded multiple times after its first dissolution in the eighth century, and hosting a Cistercian house today.[28] It matched the iconic status, historic influence, and continuing significance that Iona had in the insular world, making it the perfect first point of comparison.

The best account of the foundation of Lérins was composed by Hilary of Arles a year after the death of St Honoratus. This sermon described the saint's life and revealed the early encounters Honoratus had with the sea as he, and his companions, including his brother Venantius, left for the East to find an Antonine desert for themselves.[29] They all caught flu during their journey and had difficulties contending with the varieties of 'wind and weather'.[30] After his brother died from his illness, Honoratus returned to southern Gaul and turned his attention to the island of Lérins. The locals warned him away given the island's desolation and the many venomous snakes that infested it: they got even more dangerous when the sea was stormy.[31] St Honoratus persisted, 'craving to be cut off from the world by the barrier

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[27] Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, pp. 199-212.
[28] Published in cooperation with the current community, Anne Jolly, Yves Kinossian, Michel Lauwers (eds.), *Entre Ciel, Mer et Terres: L'Île Monastique de Lérins (V^e^-XX^e^ Siècle)* (Gent, 2017), offers an extensive overview of the history and occupation of Lérins.
[29] Hilary of Arles, *Sermo de Vita S. Honorati*, ed. and trans. Valentin, *Hilaire d'Arles: Vie de Honorat*, §§1.1, 10.3; *id*., trans. Hoare, *The Western Fathers*.
[30] *Ibid*., §§14.1-3.
[31] Hilary of Arles, *Vita Honorati*, §§15.1-3. While abandoned for some time, there does seem to have been the remains of a Roman villa on the island of Saint-Honorat, even perhaps a town on the neighbouring island of Sainte-Marguerite: Ian M. Smith, 'The Lérins Survey', Durham University Excavation Committee, *Archaeological Reports for 1983* (1984), pp. 61-3; Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, §3.79.

of the straits', and upon his arrival the 'army of serpents' retreated. He built a chapel and residences for his monks and even sourced fresh water on this arid island from a rock: 'it flowed sweet though surrounded by the saltness of the sea'.[32] The desert had become an Eden. Honoratus made Lérins a 'camp of God', *castra Dei*, to which monks flocked, along with many visitors and passing sailors. They would even stop by if it meant losing their fair winds.[33] Hilary stressed that all the monks' possessions and any gifts they received would be distributed among the community to support the functions of the monastery, but that Honoratus was so generous that their wealth never grew but was immediately exhausted in charity and lavish hospitality.[34] Some of the gifts these passersby brought to the monks of Lérins would have been incredibly high status items. This island was situated on one of the main Roman trade routes: wrecks have been discovered off the coast of Lérins that carried hundreds of amphorae, fine ware, and glass.[35] Lérins exemplified the connectivity that seaways could afford island monasteries while simultaneously providing monks with the ideal of separation.[36] Honoratus left Lérins to take up the bishopric of Arles, and Hilary's sermon from this point turns away from further descriptions of the sea to his personal virtues in that office, the manner of his death, and how Hilary came to follow him as bishop.

Hilary wrote a sermon not a hagiography. The audience were the parishioners of Arles that he had inherited from St Honoratus. Adomnán may have had a broad audience in mind for his *Life of Columba*, but he was primarily addressing his fellow

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[32] Hilary of Arles, *Vita Honorati*, §§15.3-17.1. *Cf.* Exo. 15:23-5, 17:1-7.
[33] Hilary of Arles, *Vita Honorati*, §§16.1, 17.2-3, 20.1-4; see Gen. 32:2.
[34] Hilary of Arles, *Vita Honorati*, §§20.1-4, 21.1-3.
[35] Anthony J. Parker, *Ancient Shipwrecks of the Mediterranean and the Roman Provinces* (Oxford, 1992), §§97, 424-5, 1004, 1010, 1059, 1174. This route however, including the sea near Lérins, did not come without nautical hazards: Alex Pollino, 'Les Amphores à Huile des Îles de Lerins', *Cahiers d'Archéologie Subaquatique*, 5 (1976), p. 123.
[36] Helvétius, 'Les Premières Îles Monastiques de la Gaule', p. 17.

monks living on Iona, something apparent in the level of detail he afforded the ocean environment that surrounded the island.[37] Hilary's primary audience, though he certainly had in mind that his text would be read by the monks of Lérins, were people who did not have daily interactions with the sea. Furthermore, Hilary took pains to stress that his home, the home of Honoratus, and the home of his relics, a *patria* 'founded in the love of Arles', was in the heart Gaul, not on the island of Lérins.[38] He even encouraged those who wished to follow in the example of Honoratus not to go to Lérins, but rather to come to Arles.[39] Hilary's sermon was trying to defend the holiness of Honoratus and reinforce his own suitability as bishop of Arles.[40] The sea, islands, and voyages were tools in achieving these aims. Honoratus's failed voyage to the east was principally an *apologia* for him not achieving first-hand experience of the desert. The harsh description of Lerinian environment was an attempt to do something similar: proving that his island monastery was equal in its desolation to the Egyptian desert. Very little time was given to discussing life on the island of Lérins, or the impact of the sea on monastic practice after this rhetorical purpose had been achieved. This was because Hilary wished to emphasise the island as a stage in the career and holiness of both Honoratus and himself, not their true ambition.[41] This careerist attitude towards

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[37] See above, Chapter Two, pp. 94-108.
[38] Hilary of Arles, *Vita Honorati*, §§23.2, 24.1, 25.3, 35.4-5, esp. 36.1-2: *ut mihi iuxta sepulcri sui sedem in amore vestro patriam collocaret*.
[39] *Ibid.*, §33.3-4.
[40] Hilary was under pressure from Prosper of Aquitaine who in a letter to Augustine called him out by name as flirting with the Pelagian heresy. Hilary needed to prove the holiness of his mentor, and through that holiness his own unimpeachability: Prosper of Aquitaine, *Epistula ad Augustinum*, ed. Alois Goldbacher, CSEL 57 (1911), §225 (pp. 454-68); *id*., trans. Parsons, *Saint Augustine: Letters*, FC 32, §225.
[41] The ideal life of a late antique Christian, thought of in Mosaic terms, often was divided into thirds: education, a retreat into the desert to achieve holy expertise, and then a return to society to serve a community, see: Claudia Rapp, 'Desert, City, and Countryside in the Early Christian Imagination', in in Dijkstra and van Dijk (eds.), *The Encroaching Desert*, pp. 110-11; Marguerite Harl, 'Les Trois Quarantaines de la Vie de Moïse', *Revue des Études Grecques*, 80 (1967), pp. 407-12.

monastic life and the ascetic environment has been seen as something characteristic of the Lerinian canon more generally, one that seemingly contributed to the success of Lérins' monks in acquiring bishoprics.[42]

One Lerinian author more concerned with the monastic environment of Lérins was Eucherius of Lyon. He was the earliest author associated with the island, and to whom Hilary of Arles responded with his sermon on Honoratus.[43] From an aristocratic family, Eucherius with his wife and children moved to the isle of Sainte-Marguerite having disposed of their wealth to live monastic lives. Eucherius and his sons seem to have later joined the community on Lérins.[44] In his *In Praise of the Desert* Eucherius opened by addressing Hilary. He praised Hilary's return to Lérins before he had gone on to take up Honoratus's vacant seat at Arles:

> Indeed, with great courage you set off long ago from your home and from your kin to enter into the far recesses of the great sea, yet of greater virtue was your return to the desert. [...] Now truly, when you considered following [Honoratus] to the heights of the episcopacy, love brought you back to the familiar retreat of the desert. Therefore, now you are a nobler and greater example. For before, when you sought the desert, following you watched your father; now, when you seek the desert again, you leave your father behind.[45]

This description of Honoratus as someone no longer needed by Hilary may have been significant. It was perhaps why Hilary had to emphasise in his *Sermon* that it

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[42] The self-promotion of Lérins' monks, and their ability to carry that holiness from the island desert into episcopal seats, has been likened to a modern political 'lobby' group: Marc Heijmans and Luce Pietri, 'Le "Lobby" Lérinien: Le Rayonnement du Monastère Insulaire du V^e^ Siècle au Début du VII^e^ Siècle', in Yann Codou and Michel Lauwers (eds.), *Lérins, Une Île Sainte De L'Antiquité au Moyen Âge* (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 35-61.

[43] Hilary mentioned Eucherius by name in his *Vita Honorati*, §22.2, describing how Eucherius received a letter from Honoratus.

[44] A concise overview of Eucherius's life is provided by Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The Symbol Gives Life: Eucherius of Lyons' Formula for Exegesis', in Thomas Finn and Vincent Twomey (eds.), *Scriptural Interpretation in the Fathers: Letter and Spirit* (Dublin, 1995), pp. 222-4.

[45] Eucherius of Lyon, *De Laude Eremi*, ed. and trans. Salvatore Pricoco, *Eucherio: Elogio Dell'Eremo* (Bologna, 2014), §1.1-3: *Magno tu quidem animo egressus dudum de domo tua et de cognatione tua usque in mare magnum recedentia penetraveras, maiore tamen virtute eremus a te repetita est. [...] Nunc vero, cum eundem ascitum ad pontificale fastigium prosequendum putaveris, ad familiare secretum eremi te amor rettulit. Ergo nunc es noblior et maior exemplo. Prius enim, cum desertum peteres, comitatus patrem videbaris; nunc, cum desertum repertieris, etiam patrem reliquisti*.

was in Arles, a city that he had seemingly rejected, that 'love' built him a new home around the relics of a man who he had also abandoned. *In Praise of the Desert* mainly discussed the virtues of the desert as a place significant to God, His divine providence, and the Christian story.[46] Its readers were reminded of the miracles, divine revelations, and crucial acts that occurred in the desert: the journey of Moses and the Israelites, the prophecies of John the Baptist, and Christ's temptations. 'Oh, great praise to the desert, that the devil, who had conquered in paradise, should be defeated in the wasteland'![47] Eucherius also argued that the desert was the perfect environment for philosophical training and spiritual perfection.[48]

At the end of his work Eucherius described Lérins, which he singled out for special praise:

> Truly, I owe reverence to all the desert places which are made famous by the retreat of pious men, but, with special honour, I love my Lérins. Stretching out her most gentle arms to those shipwrecked by this stormy world, she harbours those returning to her. Those burning in the heat of the world, she shelters in her soothing shade. There the breathless recover their spirits under the interior shade of the Lord. Flowing waters, verdant plants, vibrant flowers, pleasant sights and smells, she presents herself to those who possess paradise, the paradise that they will possess.[49]

This passage evoked the same imagery of the prelapsarian Eden used by Hilary in his *Sermon*, suggesting not only that the desert could mirror the heavenly paradise, but that those who live in that desert can directly experience the reward they would obtain in death. This passage is also reminiscent of Iona's association of the sea and

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[46] Eucherius of Lyon, *De Laude Eremi*, §29.1: 'Long ago the concern of divine providence towards the desert was the highest and greatest, but truthfully now it is not small' / *Fuit olim erga eremum cura divinae providentiae summa et maxima, sed ne nunc quidem parva est.*
[47] *Ibid*., §23.3: *O laus magna deserti, ut diabolus, qui vicerat in paradiso, in eremo vinceretur!*
[48] *Ibid*., §§31-3.
[49] *Ibid*., §42: *Equidem cunctis eremi locis quae piorum illuminantur secessu reverentiam debeo, praecipuo tamen Lirinum meam honore complector, quae procellossi naufragiis mundi effusis piissimis ulnis receptat venientes ab illo, saeculi flagrantes aestu blande introducit sub umbras suas, ut illic spiritum sub illa interiore domini umbra anheli resumant. Aquis scatens, herbis virens, floribus renitens, visibus odoribusque iocunda, paradisum possidentibus se exhibet quem possidebunt.*

its dangers with the *saeculum*, but whereas Iona's monks rowed infinitely through that ocean storm, Lérins was an escape to sailors.[50] At the end of the work Eucherius appealed once more to Hilary, telling him that his return to the desert would also grant him entry into heaven: 'As you joined with Israel in the desert, so too will you enter with Christ into the promised land'.[51] By casting Hilary as Moses, Eucherius was attempting to justify to Honoratus's former pupil that by returning to Lérins he would be taking up a holy mission superior to one in a Gallic bishopric. Conrad Leyser has remarked that this closing statement is indicative of a theme that dominated the body of Lerinian texts: the crisis of losing Honoratus and the attempt to cajole its major students to stay on the island.[52] What role the sea and the island environment might have played for the monks of Lérins was of little relevance in this context.

In contrast, Eucherius's praise for his island monastery has been interpreted by others as part of a specific 'insular ecclesiology' that established islands as holy environments.[53] Yet even those authors who have argued this of Eucherius have accepted that his *In Praise of the Desert* made no mention of islands, nor mentioned that Lérins was itself an island.[54] However, I do think that Eucherius did include, though obscured, some justification of the value of islands in his *In Praise of the Desert*. In his description of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red the Sea, the author focused on not only on Moses reaching a desert paradise, but also paid close

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[50] See above, Chapter Three, p. 164.
[51] Eucherius of Lyon, *De Laude Eremi*, §44: *qui cum Israhel in eremo contineris, cum Iesu terram repromissionis intrabis*.
[52] Conrad Leyser, '"This Sainted Isle": Panegyric, Nostalgia, and the Invention of Lerinian Monasticism', in William Klingshirn and Mark Vessey (eds.), *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R.A. Markus* (Ann Arbor MI, 1999), pp. 195-7.
[53] Rosa Maria Dessì and Michel Lauwers, 'Désert, Église, Île Sainte. Lérins et la Sanctification des Îles Monastiques de l'Antiquité à la Fin du Moyen Âge', in Codou and Lauwers (eds.), *Lérins, Une Île Sainte*, pp. 231-79.
[54] *Ibid*., p. 251.

attention to the Israelites entering the waters, and the waters closing behind them: 'He opened a way among the waters, and then covered them with the confused waters, so as to open the way to those seeking the desert, and to close the way back'.[55] This could have symbolised the separation an island desert provided, and the journey a monk might make to reach Lérins. It is notable that when casting Hilary as Moses to close his work, Eucherius incorporated this language of the water opening and closing behind him.[56] This may have been a subtle metaphorical justification that islands could embody the desert into which Moses led the Israelites and were therefore equal to the deserts inhabited by hermits like Antony.

That Eucherius preferred to exclusively call Lérins a desert, using either the Latin *eremus* or *desertum*, may have also been significant. One simple explanation is that, like Hilary, Eucherius was simply trying to paint Lérins as a desert because deserts were the more prestigious monastic environment. In another work, *The Formulas of Spiritual Intelligence*, which justified using allegorical interpretations of the Bible, Eucherius expounded on the meaning islands had in the Bible which may better reveal why he made this choice.[57] For Eucherius, 'Islands are either the souls of men or the churches of God, which are buffeted by various waves of temptations', an interpretation which he drew from psalm ninety-six, 'let the many islands rejoice!'.[58] Eucherius may have avoided describing Lérins as an island because if he singled out his island-monastery as worthy of praise he could be shown to have singled out one 'island' from amongst the others, that is, one 'soul' or one 'church'

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[55] Eucherius of Lyon, *De Laude Eremi*, §10.2: *Aperuit inter aquas viam et confusis deinde aquis texit, ut desertum expetentibus patefaceret itum, clauderet reditum*. See also, §9.
[56] *Ibid*., §44.
[57] For this work's influence see O'Loughlin, 'The Symbol Gives Life', pp. 221-2. This work may have also been in the library available to Adomnán: O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, p. 248.
[58] Eucherius of Lyon, *Formulae Spiritalis Intellegentiae*, ed. Carmela Mandolfo, CCSL 66 (2004), ll. 395-396: *Insulae vel animae vel ecclesiae Dei, quae diversis temptationum tunduntur fluctibus*; Ps. 96:1: *laetentur insulae multae*; Dessì and Lauwers, 'Désert, Église, Île sainte', p. 253.

whose faith or practice were more divinely appointed.[59] Jerome argued that psalm ninety-six spoke of many islands because unlike Judaism, which had one people, one land, and one church to whom God showed his favour and protection, the universal Church of Christ now embraces all peoples.[60] Eucherius could have feared reprisals from those who would harness the insular environment of Lérins as a weapon to harm the monastery's reputation.

Iona's ocean isolation and insularity was used to suggest that they were practitioners of Pelagianism or Judaism.[61] The monks of Lérins in the process of their self-promotion did not help their cause. Sidonius Apollinaris praised Lerinian bishops and suggested that the prayers they learned on the island were more powerful than those of other clerics.[62] Indeed, the isolation of Eucherius's island may have led those already suspicious of Lérins to associate the physical separation of the island with spiritual separation from the body of Church practice and belief. Pope Celestine, under pressure from the likes of Prosper of Aquitaine, targeted those ascetics elevated to the rank of bishop in southern Gaul who had 'come from isolated places' and were exhibiting divergent practices. Some were criminals, fleeing from the eastern Mediterranean, but many were also exuberant monks fresh from their Lerinian training.[63] In response to some of this pressure perhaps, Eucherius transformed his island monastery, bounded by the shoreline, into just one piece of the 'unbounded desert that is rightly the temple of our God'.[64] The Ionan authors in

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[59] Dessì and Lauwers, 'Désert, Église, Île sainte', pp. 252-62.
[60] *Ibid*., pp. 258-62; Jerome, *Tractatus LIX in Psalmos*, Ps. 96 (§§24, 73).
[61] Cummian, *De Controversia Paschali*, ll. 86-120, 173-189; *HE*, §§ii.19, v.21.
[62] Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae*, ed. and trans. W.B. Anderson, *Sidonius. Letters: Books 3-9* (Cambridge MA, 1965), §§6.1.1-3, 8.14.2, 9.3.4.
[63] Celestine I, *Epistulae*, *PL* 50 (1846), §4.2: *Habeant tamen istum forsitan cultum, morem potius quam rationem sequentes, qui remotioribus habitant locis, et procul a caeteris degunt. Unde hic habitus in Ecclesiis Gallicanis, ut tot annorum tantorumque pontificum in alterum habitum consuetudo vertatur?*; see also, *id*., §§4.5, 21.1-3; Heijmans and Pietri, 'Le "Lobby" Lérinien', p. 42.
[64] Eucherius, *De Laude Eremi*, §3.3: *Eremum ergo recte incircumscriptum dei nostri templum dixerim*.

contrast did not obscure the fact that their monastery was situated on an island.[65] Instead, they accepted and valued their ocean island as crucial in the story of Christian salvation and the gospel's spread.[66] This may have been because life on the island of Iona was deeply shaped by the ocean that surrounded it, offering significant challenges to founding and maintaining a monastic community: the insularity of Iona was undeniable, and formed a crucial part of a monastic identity the monks had little interest in denying.[67] Life on Lérins, though insular, was very different.

Excavations of the late antique monastery have revealed an interesting shift in the construction and use of the monastic buildings. The early community seems to have occupied buildings divided between communal spaces and small cells for solitary devotion.[68] In one of these buildings, the space for solitary use was transformed into playing a funerary or commemorative function starting from the second half of the sixth century. Small living spaces were replaced with burials and signs of devotion. These were the graves of either famous early Lerinian monks, or perhaps people wishing to be buried close to the earliest holy places on the island.[69] Hilary's *Sermon on the Life of St Honoratus* spoke of the wealth gained by the monastery through visitors, and that the island opened itself up to the sea- and trade-routes that passed by. Previously eremitical cells could have been converted to harness those wishing to travel to and worship at these places of Lerinian ascetic heroism.[70] At the time when these changes to the organisation of Lérins were

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[65] *VC*, §§i.1, ii.45.
[66] See above, Chapter Two, pp. 136-40.
[67] However, Adomnán's portrayal of a dense network of ocean connections in his *Life* may have been a way of refuting that insularity: see Chapter Two.
[68] Yann Codou, 'Aux Origines du Monachisme en Gaule (V$^{e}$-XI$^{e}$ s.): Les Fouilles de l'Église du Saint-Saveur, Lérins, Île Saint-Honorat, Alpes-Maritimes', in Jurković (ed.), *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, 19, pp. 63-6. Small grottos and even an offshore island hermitage have been discovered: Smith, 'The Lérins Survey', p. 65.
[69] Codou, 'Aux Origines du Monachisme en Gaule', pp. 66-7.
[70] The landscape of Iona may have similarly been monumentalised and ritualised for the community and the potential pilgrims to the island: Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem "At the Ends of

occurring, Honoratus had been dead for over a century.[71] Perhaps the monastery was moving away from a programme of solitary ascetic devotion to becoming a cult centre, and a community focused on internal reflection and spiritual development. Faustus of Riez, a Briton and one of Honoratus's successors as abbot, seems to have advocated such a programme of devotion.[72] Faustus argued that the holy charisma Honoratus had shown on Lérins sanctified the monastery, and the island that it was built on without needing the presence of his corporeal relics:

> Let them have the tabernacle of his blessed soul resting in his ashes, if we should keep his very soul that rests in his virtues. Let them have his bones, we shall keep his merits for ourselves. [...] They love that which is enclosed in a tomb, we embrace what is contained in paradise.[73]

All this could alter the monastic practice and space of Lérins, turning it more towards communal habits and the use of former ascetic cells for the commemoration of those first Lerinian heroes and their ideals.[74] This may have also been a strategy to maintain, or perhaps regain, those tourists and pilgrims bringing wealth to Lérins who otherwise would travel to Arles to pray at the bones of Honoratus.

Archaeological excavations on Lérins also discovered evidence for the monastic diet, showing it to be quite meagre.[75] This was in contrast to how some have depicted the monastic community as one of the most obvious examples of

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the Earth"', pp. 52-8; Márkus, 'Four Blessings and a Funeral', pp. 1-26; *cf*. Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland: Architecture, Ritual and Memory* (New Haven CT, 2010) pp. 211-13.

[71] *Ibid*.

[72] Sidonius Apollinaris called Faustus a Briton, this may be of Britain or of Brittany: *Epistulae*, §9.9.6. The sermons quoted below are attributed to 'Eusebius Gallicanus', some of which were likely to have been composed by Faustus of Riez: for a full discussion of their authorship see Lisa Kaaren Bailey, *Christianity's Quiet Success. The Eusebius Gallicanus Sermon Collection and the Power of the Church in Late Antique Gaul* (Notre Dame IN, 2010), pp. 29-38.

[73] Faustus of Riez, *In Depositione Sancti Honorati Episcopi* = 'Eusebius Gallicanus', *Collectio Homiliarum*, ed. François Glorie, CCSL 101A (1971), §72.12: *Teneant illi tabernaculum beatae animae in cineribus suis, nos ipsam teneamus animam in virtutibus suis; teneant illi ossa, nos merita [...] amplectantur illi quod sepulcro includitur, nos quod paradiso continetur*.

[74] Codou, 'Aux Origines du Monachisme en Gaule', pp. 66-7.

[75] *Ibid*., p. 65.

Roman aristocratic leisure, luxury, and relaxation, continuing in a monastic context.[76] These authors have assumed that the aristocratic wealth of many Lerinian monks, in land as well as in goods, was given over to the monastery for its upkeep. It has been argued recently that, potentially from the very beginnings of Lérins' monastic foundation, rather than being wealthy, the monastery seems to have been economically dependent on the Gallic episcopacy.[77] Hilary said in his *Sermon* that one of the key reasons that Honoratus chose Lérins as the site for his monastery was its closeness to bishop Leontius of Fréjus.[78] The bishop of Fréjus seems to have continued after this to play a key role in supplying the monastery of Lérins with provisions and money, something that caused controversy during the abbacy of Faustus in the early 450s.[79] This dispute may have come about because the monastery lacked the supplies it needed to function as it had been doing.[80] One of the key supporters of Faustus in this controversy was the bishop Maximus of Riez, who Faustus succeeded as abbot and would do so as bishop, showing that the solidarity

[76] Jaques Fontaine, 'Valeurs Antiques et Valeurs Chrétiennes dans la Spiritualité des Grands Propriétaires Terriens à la Fin du IV$^{e}$ Siècle Occidental', in Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kannengiesser (eds.), *Epektasis: Mélanges Patristiques Offerts au Cardinal Jean Daniélou* (Paris, 1972), pp. 571-95; Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism*, pp. 33-4; Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton NJ, 2012), pp. 415, 419-21; Richard Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian: Aristocrats, Asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth-Century Gaul* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 151-3.
[77] See the recent article by Matheus Figuinha, 'The Economy of the Monastery of Lérins (c.400-c.460)', in Giovanni Alberto Cecconi, Rita Lizzi Testa, and Arnaldo Marcone (eds.), *The Past as Present: Essays on Roman History in Honour of Guido Clemente* (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 365-84.
[78] Hilary of Arles, *Vita Honorati*, §15.2.
[79] The result of this dispute was that the rights and relationship between Fréjus and Lérins were to be returned to that between Leontius and Honoratus; while the bishop of Fréjus Theodorus maintained the right to ordain the monks of Lérins along with other duties, regular and lay monks still were under the authority of Faustus, and Fréjus had to support the functioning of Lérins: *Institutio Sanctorum Episciporum [...] in Causa Insulae Lerinensis*, ed. Charles Munier, *Concilia Galliae*, CCSL 148 (1963), pp. 133-4. A good survey of this dispute is given by Ralph W. Mathisen, *Ecclesiastical Factionalism and Religious Controversy in Fifth-Century Gaul* (Washington DC, 1989), pp. 193-8. See also, Figuinha, 'The Economy of Lérins', pp. 378-80; and Adalbert de Vogüé, *Histoire Littéraire du Movement Monastique dans l'Antiquité. Première Partie: Le Monachisme Latin*, vol 7: *L'Essor de la Littérature Lérinienne et les Écrits Contemporains (410-500)* (Paris, 2003), pp. 315-24.
[80] Figuinha, 'The Economy of Lérins', p. 79.

between Lerinian bishops and the island that trained them was part of the mechanism to secure the monastery's maintenance.[81]

This economic reliance on the bishop of Fréjus, and the crucial role of Lerinian alumni in the episcopate to protect these necessary privileges, says something significant about Lérins' insularity and the monks' use of the sea. While previous scholars assumed that the monks could produce all their own food, the small size of the island, and the fact that a large portion of it was taken up by forests, would have limited the arable land available.[82] The austere dietary evidence discovered in the excavations supports this. Fernand Braudel said that Mediterranean islands are almost always 'lands of hunger', who could never, or only partially, overcome the problem of living off the resources the island produced: Lérins looks no different.[83] Lérins' monks relied upon the deliveries from the bishop of Fréjus and other donations to feed themselves. The monks needed the sea to connect them to these supplies, but they seem to have been passive recipients. In contrast, Iona's monks were active in setting sail to defend their rights, such as to seal rookeries, and personally maintained their relationships with nearby farmers who supported their sustainability.[84] The archaeological evidence has also shown that the wood burned by the monks of Lérins was primarily sourced from forests present on their own island and that of Sainte-Marguerite next door.[85] Although the wood was used for far larger construction projects, Iona's monks had to sail themselves up sea-lochs in adverse

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[81] *Exemplar Epistulae [...] in Cusa Insulae Lerensis Missa Est*, ed. Munier, CCSL 148, p. 132.
[82] The bishop Maximus is described as retreating into the island's forests to avoid being made bishop of Fréjus: Faustus of Riez, *Homilia de Sancto Maximo*, = 'Eusebius Gallicanus', *Collectio Homiliarum*, ed. François Glorie, CCSL 101 (1970), §35.8; Figuinha, 'The Economy of Lérins', p. 372.
[83] Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, i, p. 152.
[84] *VC*, §§i.41, ii.3.
[85] Isabelle Gillot and Yann Codou, 'Un Témoin de l'Environnement de l'Île Saint-Honorat de Lérins (Alpes-Maritimes): Le Combustible Utilisé dans la Chapelle Saint-Sauveur Durant l'Antiquité Tardive et le haut Moyen Âge', *Bulletin Archéologique de Provence*, 38 (2017), pp. 95-104.

winds to gather timber where it had been dragged from inland, and then sail back to use those materials to repair and expand their monastery.[86] Even withies needed to be sourced by boat, though potentially closer to the monastery.[87] These specific journeys were used by Adomnán to reveal the theological as well as economic importance of the ocean to Iona.[88] That the monks of Lérins lacked this personal use of the sea could reflect why the sea and their specific island environment featured so little in their writings.

Even if Iona and Lérins shared insular environments that made them rely on lands outside their confines to make their institutions sustainable, the Ionan monks' daily and personal confrontation with the ocean set them apart. Jean-Michel Picard has made the point that Lérins and other Gallo-Roman writers had established a particularly martial language of island monasticism that Iona and other future island monasteries adopted to represent their Christian mission.[89] As 'island soldiers' they battled their vices and temptations in the hope of salvation.[90] However, whereas the monks of Lérins were adopting Roman military imagery to show that they rejected those martial ideals in favour the Christian moral programme, the insular monks of Iona had never come into contact with the Roman military machine, and chose this language because it represented the monastic struggle they actually experienced.[91] The ocean climate, and a daily confrontation with the Atlantic helped make that military struggle a reality for Iona's monks. Life on Lérins was not as leisured as

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[86] *VC*, §ii.45.
[87] *VC*, §ii.3.
[88] See above, Chapter Three, pp. 177-81.
[89] Jean-Michel Picard, '*Miles Insulanus*. Les Îles Monastiques Irlandaises et l'Idéal du Désert Marin', in Codou and Lauwers (eds.), *Lérins, Une Île Sainte*, pp. 312-13.
[90] Honorat of Merseille, *Vita Hilarii*, ed. and trans. Samuel Cavallin and Paul-André Jacob, *Honorat de Marseille: La Vie d'Hilaire d'Arles*, SC 404 (1995), §7; Eucherius of Lyon, *Instructiones ad Salonium*, ed. Mandolfo, CCSL 66, §i, ll. 25-26; Faustus of Riez, *Epistulae ad Ruricium*, ed. R. Demeulenaere, CCSL 64 (1985), §8(1), ll. 59-62.
[91] Picard, 'Les Îles Monastiques Irlandaises', pp. 312-13.

some have painted it. The monks seem to have attempted to stay true to the ascetic ideals set up by Antony, free of the trappings of luxury, and perhaps even of fine food. Yet unlike Iona's monks, they were removed from some of those essential challenges that came with island living, which may have reflected why some would not have cared that Eucherius did not call their home an island: they did not have to engage with the full range of island demands.

## Irish Island Monasticism

> Patrick came with his Gauls to the islands of Moccu Chor and to the eastern island, which is called Patrick's Island. [...] He went on land in Mag Breg at sunrise, with the blessing of God, with the true sun of wondrous doctrine, enlightening the thick darkness of ignorance.[92]

Patrick's early hagiographers took pains to tie Patrick's Island, *Inis Pádraig*, to the start of the saint's mission to bring Christianity to Ireland.[93] Off the coast of Skerries, just north of Dublin, it was home to an early monastery that was raided by the Vikings in AD 798.[94] Patrick said nothing about of such an island playing a part in his arrival. These stories reveal more about the interests of Patrick's later hagiographers who wanted to obscure that the coastline Patrick was arriving on was in fact already somewhat Christian.[95] These stories do however capture something of the important role ascribed to islands and island monasteries by some historians for the Christianisation of Ireland, and the Church's monastic character. Ireland is an island full of, and surrounded by, many other islands where early monks founded

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[92] Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §§3-4: *Venit uero Patricius cum Gallis ad insolas Maccu Chor et insola orientali, quae dicitur Insola Patricii, [...] Ascendit autem de mari ad campum Breg sole orto cum benedictione Dei, cum vero sole mirae doctrinae, densas tenebras ignorantiae inluminans*.
[93] See also, Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, §§1.11(10).1-2.
[94] Annette Kehnel, 'List of Medieval Religious Houses on Islands: Ireland', in Signori (ed.), *Inselklöster – Klosterinseln*, pp. 103, 119; Aubrey Gwynn and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland* (London, 1970), p. 44; *AU*, §798.2.
[95] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 236-67.

monasteries. Over half of all the island monasteries, fifty-seven out of a hundred-and-three, were established in the fifth and sixth centuries, with another twenty coming in the seventh and eighth.[96] Iona's foundation and its apex of influence came at a time in Ireland when island monasticism was already a common expression of Christian asceticism. Over half of these monasteries were founded on sea-islands, mainly off the west coast of Ireland, while many lake-island foundations were founded on the Upper and Lower Lough Erne, and throughout the Shannon.[97] However, none of these islands compared to Iona or Lérins in the number of documentary sources they produced, or in their historical significance. Unlike in the previous section of this chapter, I cannot perform a focused one-to-one comparison between a key Irish island monastery and Iona. Instead, this section must compare Iona to the broad characteristics of Irish island monasticism: their cultural underpinnings and their institutional structures.

Some historians have suggested that island monasteries were key outposts for early Christians who used these sites like 'bridgeheads', initial bases for their progressive conversion of the mainland.[98] This looks very similar to the role of Patrick's Island as spoken of by Tírechán. The process of Christianisation more generally has been seen as one starting on the margins, an early 'church apart from society rather than incorporated within it'.[99] Few churches seem to have been founded on sites of pre-existing occupation, presenting a vision of the early Church as a small community of Christians unengaged with the extant pagan power

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[96] Kehnel, 'List of Medieval Religious Houses on Islands: Ireland', pp. 103-09.
[97] *Ibid*.
[98] This narrative developed from archaeological work giving primacy to cultural change through sea-lane networks and coastal outposts (including islands), with early comparisons between Megalithic culture and Iona's evangelisation of England: Vere Gordan Childe, *The Prehistory of European Society* (Harmondsworth, 1958), pp. 128-9; Harold Peake, *The Bronze Age and the Celtic World* (New York NY, 1922), pp. 48-60. The historiographical background is best summed up with many useful comments by Wooding, 'Island and Coastal Churches in Medieval Wales and Ireland', pp. 214-18.
[99] Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, p. 61.

structures and aristocracy.[100] Many early churches and monasteries in south-west Ireland were built on land that was unused by local communities: often below a hundred feet of altitude, on coastlines, in river valleys, and on islands. Those sites on valley floors were often called *dísert*, 'desert', and were of low-quality, marshy and heavily forested land that needed to be cleared. This led to the term *cluain* appearing in placenames, meaning 'land won from the forest'.[101] These early 'desert' churches may signal the strong monastic character of early Irish Christianity. They may have also aligned with an early institutional Church that sought to isolate itself from a society that was still deeply pagan: remote island monasteries such as Skellig Michael and Illauntannig were geographical representations of this.[102] This could also take the form of conspicuous distance: early churches like Dunshaughlin, Killashee, and Kilcullen were within view of sites like Tara, Naas, and Dún Ailinne, offering a challenge to these sites that were associated with pagan kingship and authority.[103]

The 'bridgehead' function of Irish island monasteries has been challenged by Jenny White Marshall.[104] She instead has argued that island monasticism in Ireland was a logical and progressive development of mainland monasticism, sponsored by magnates and often controlled by growing monastic *paruchiae*. Using the example of

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[100] O'Sullivan *et al*., *Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400-1100*, pp. 143-5, 320-1.
[101] Vincent Hurly, 'The Early Church in the South-West of Ireland: Settlement and Organisation', in Susan M. Pearce (ed.), *The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland: Studies Presented to C.A. Ralegh Radford* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 307-10. Hurley does state however that some early churches also followed existing settlement patterns.
[102] Michael Herren, 'Mission and Monasticism in the *Confessio* of Patrick', in Ó Corráin, Breatnach, and McCone (eds.), *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*, pp. 76-84; Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland* pp. 60-73 (Mytum has however recognised that these sites are later foundations).
[103] John Waddell, 'Continuity, Cult and Contest', in Roseanne Schot, Conor Newman, and Edel Bhreathnach (eds.), *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 211-12; Liam de Paor, *Saint Patrick's World: The Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age* (Dublin, 1993), p. 41.
[104] Jenny White Marshall, 'The Extension of Mainland *Paruchiae* to the Offshore Islands of Illauntannig, High Island and Inishmurray' (PhD Thesis, University of Los Angeles, 1989), pp. 5-9, 243-9; Jenny White Marshall and Grellan D. Rourke, *High Island: An Irish Monastery in the Atlantic* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 173-83; *id*., 'The Secular Origins of the Monastic Enclosure Wall of High Island, Co. Galway', *Archaeology Ireland* 14:2 (2000), pp. 30-4.

High Island, Co. Galway she and Grellan Rourke have argued that stone walls that had been built on the island and integrated into the monastic enclosure were originally used by secular magnates who donated the island to the monks and supported the island monastery afterwards.[105] Most recently, Tomás Ó Carragáin has put forward a similar model of early conversion and church construction showing that islands were occupied as part of the process of Christianity radiating outward from power centres, with an initial focus on assembly sites, and in close cooperation with magnates.[106] Whereas assembly sites and many locations of secular power may appear marginal at first, this mistakes what a central place such locations had in the political, social, and cultural imagination of early medieval Ireland. Pádraig Ó Riain has argued that churches on territorial boundaries, while at first seeming aloof, were in fact at the real 'cosmic centre' ('cosmic confine') of Irish society. They also played a practical role by forging relations across those boundaries.[107] In Ó Carragáin's estimation, the island churches and the most important monasteries that bore some of the ascetic ideal of distance, were settled in the secondary wave of foundations when they were more likely to be placed on the actual margins of secular power.[108] This land was 'marginal' in two senses: it was further away from royal centres and assembly sites than the first church foundations, and they were often on agriculturally marginal land too.[109] Once founded, many island churches

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[105] White Marshall and Rourke, *High Island*, pp. 173-83; White Marshall and Rourke, 'The Monastic Enclosure of High Island', pp. 30-4.
[106] Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, pp. 58-63; Patrick Gleeson and Tomás Ó Carragáin, 'Conversion and Consolidation in Leinster's Royal Heartland', in Tomás Ó Carragáin and Sam Turner (eds.), *Making Christian Landscapes in Atlantic Europe: Conversion and Consolidation in the Early Middle Ages* (Cork, 2016), pp. 104-8.
[107] Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, pp. 58-63, 134; Pádraig Ó Riain, 'Boundary Association in Early Irish Society', *Studia Celtica*, 7 (1972), pp. 17-19.
[108] Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, pp. 129-37.
[109] These were the *dísert* sites discussed by Hurley above: 'The Early Church in the South-West of Ireland', pp. 307-10. Abandoned forts in Britain were often gifted to monastic founders because such sites were built on poor land that local lords would be willing to give away: *HE*, §§iii.19, iii.22, iv.22(20), iv.23(21); Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain*, p. 33.

became subsumed and controlled by the growing monastic *paruchiae* who often used these islands as outposts to send their monks to gain hermetical experience.[110] To think of these islands as the outposts of charismatic holy men at the forefront of Christian expansion, like Patrick or Iona's monks seeking to spread Christianity to the 'ends of the earth', obscures the real mechanics of the cooperative expansion of the Church which was deeply connected to mainland power.[111] Islands were just one part of this larger pattern.

Jonathan Wooding has pushed back on both these systematised views of island monasticism and its beginnings in Britain and Ireland for not granting any value to the undercurrent of Christian ideals and Irish cultural thought that may have been the real spark for early monks seeking out these environments.[112] For Wooding, early Christian charismatics could have taken the first step to fill these islands with monasteries or hermitages and the evidence is not conclusive enough to say otherwise. Pre-existing structures on islands, such as those on High Island, do not necessitate a secular ownership or sponsorship of early island communities, and Wooding has pointed to the example of Anthony of Egypt who also established himself in an abandoned fort.[113] Otherwise, early monks may have wanted to position themselves as bulwarks against the demons that inhabited the seas, and would return to shore at the time of Judgement.[114] Skellig Michael was, after all,

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[110] Hurly, 'The Early Church in the South-West of Ireland', p. 310. On the advantages of joining sometimes distant monastic *paruchiae*, see T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Church and Settlement', in Ní Chatháin and Richter (eds.), *Ireland and Europe*, pp. 167-71.
[111] White Marshall and Rourke, 'The Monastic Enclosure of High Island', p. 34.
[112] Jonathan Wooding, '*Peregrini* in the Ocean: Spirituality and Reality', in Purcell *et al*. (eds.), *Clerics, Kings and Vikings*, pp. 413-15. See also *id*., 'Island and Coastal Churches in Medieval Wales and Ireland', pp. 201-28; *id*., 'Island Monasticism in Wales: Towards a Historical Archaeology', *Studia Celtica*, 54 (2020), pp. 1-2.
[113] Wooding, '*Peregrini* in the Ocean', pp. 413-15; Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, §12.
[114] Ian Fisher, 'The Monastery of Iona in the Eighth Century', in O'Mahony (ed.), *The Book of Kells*, pp. 35-6; Rev. 20:3-7; Luke 8:26-33; Mark 5:1-13; Tomás Ó Carragáin, 'The View from the Shore: Perceiving Island Monasteries in Early Medieval Ireland', in Jurković (ed.), *Hortus Artium*

dedicated to the archangel that battled Satan.[115] Island landscapes could also provide monks with a topography particularly suited to the ideals of the desert, and they became the most likely environment that signalled monasteries and hermitages in Ireland.[116] When Colmán departed from Lindisfarne after the Synod of Whitby, he and his monks made an initial expedition to the island of Inishbofin. They were likely guided by the ideals of physical and spiritual isolation. It was after this, by building relationships with the mainland magnates, that Colmán secured the patronage necessary to maintain his community.[117] One may reasonably question Bede's account of Colmán and his monks building the monastery themselves without any material aid, labour, or seed crops provided by either a nearby secular ruler or a larger church. This help was certainly given to them when they founded Mayo of the Saxons on the mainland.[118]

Iona was founded with secular cooperation.[119] One of the key pieces of evidence that White Marshall and Rourke used to argue that island monasticism grew from secular sponsorship was that the monastic enclosure of Iona, potentially like High Island, was built before the occupation of Columba and his monks.[120] That Columba could found Iona outside the lands of his family probably signalled some relationship existing between the Dál Riata and his Cenél Conaill kin, perhaps an

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*Medievalium*, 19, pp. 23-4; O'Loughlin, 'Living in the Ocean', p. 12; O'Loughlin, 'The View from Iona', pp. 118-21; Wooding, '*Peregrini* in the Ocean', pp. 414-17.

[115] Rev. 12:7.

[116] Ó Carragáin, 'The View from the Shore', p. 21. Of course there could be island churches as well, but evidence suggests that even these had a major monastic component.

[117] *HE*, §iv.4; Wooding, '*Peregrini* in the Ocean', p. 414.

[118] Ryan Lash, 'Island Taskscapes: Heritage, Ritual, and Sustainability on Inishark and Inishbofin, Ireland' (PhD Thesis, Northwestern University, 2019), pp. 82-9; Vera Orschel, 'The Early History of Mayo of the Saxons', in Gerard Moran and Nollaig Ó Muraíle (eds.), *Mayo: History and Society. Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County* (Dublin, 2014), p. 79.

[119] See above, Introduction, p. 7.

[120] McCormick, 'Excavations at Iona, 1988', pp. 80, 102-04; White Marshall, 'The Spread of Mainland *Paruchiae*', pp. 6-9; White Marshall and Rourke, 'The Secular Origins of the Monastic Enclosure Wall of High Island', p. 31. *Cf.* below, Chapter One, p. 48 n. 111.

alliance.[121] Whereas Adomnán's *Life* and the poetry of Iona's monks stressed that the foundation of Iona was an expression of Columba's *peregrinatio pro Christo*, 'wandering for Christ', often it was kin politics and dynastic aims that really underwrote the land given to monasteries.[122] Finbar McCormick has interpreted the foundation of Iona as showing that the Dál Riata had recently conquered the land surrounding the island. They wanted to place a friendly monastery in this new territory to 'neutralise' the space and create a mediator between themselves and the nearby Pictish kings, as well as with Columba's Uí Néill kin in Ireland.[123] Strikingly, Columba's foundation of Iona overlaps neatly with the bridgehead thesis: Columba and his monks were well placed to launch missions to convert the Picts.[124] While Jonathan Wooding has doubted most claims that island monasteries were the headquarters for missionary activities, he singled Iona out as the key exception.[125]

Columba and his monks may not have only built a monastery to nullify contested political space, they may have also occupied an island with pagan religious meaning, and so conquered hostile supernatural territory.[126] Martin Carver has suggested that the semi-island monastery of Portmahomack in northern Scotland, and potentially Iona itself, had been previously occupied by charismatic holy pagans.[127] One can imagine a multitude of holy islands full of pre-Christian religious specialists off the coasts of Britain such as those described by Demetrius:

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[121] Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 28-9, see also n. 66.
[122] *VC*, §pref.2: *de Scotia ad Brittannium pro Christo perigrinari volens enavigavit*; *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §vii. See also, Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'The Early Irish Churches: Some Aspects of Organisation', in Donnchadh Ó Corráin (ed.), *Irish Antiquity: Essays and Studies Presented to Professor M.J. O'Kelly* (Dublin, 1994), pp. 327-40.
[123] McCormick, 'Excavations at Iona, 1988', pp. 103-04.
[124] The island and ocean geography facilitating this 'bridgehead' role is mentioned by T.M. Charles-Edwards as one reason why historians should trust Bede's account of Columba's journey to Britain: *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 298.
[125] Wooding, 'Island and Coastal Churches in Medieval Wales and Ireland', p. 222, n. 125.
[126] McCormick, 'Excavations at Iona, 1988', pp. 103-04.
[127] Martin Carver, 'Early Scottish Monasteries and Prehistory: A Preliminary Dialogue', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 88:2 (2009), pp. 336, 344-51.

> Among the islands lying near Britain were many isolated, having few or no inhabitants, some of which bore the names of divinities or heroes. [One] had only a few inhabitants, holy men who were all held inviolate by the Britons.[128]

Indeed, islands such as Inishmurray, Inchmarnock, and the Isle of May all showed signs of having an Iron Age religious function.[129] These islands may have been environments preferred by pagan holy men for many of the same reasons as for Christians: personal asceticism and worldly separation.

In the early Irish tradition islands also had an association with the 'otherworld', an invisible land of mythical heroes and supernatural power.[130] Ocean islands were portals where one could reach the 'otherworld' along with mountains, hills, places underground, under lakes, and beneath the sea.[131] An 'otherworld' island in a lake hosted a hall of feasting supernatural warriors,[132] while landing on an 'otherworld' island in the Atlantic could make an unwary sailor lose their very identity:

> Afterwards, Bran proceeded from him until he saw an island. They were rowing all around the coast and a great crowd was gaping and laughing. They were all staring at Bran and his men, but they were not stopping to speak with them, they kept crying forth howls of laughter at them. Bran sent a man from his company onto the island. He went among them and began gaping at

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[128] A.R. Burn, 'Holy Men on Islands in Pre-Christian Britain', *Glasgow Archaeological Journal*, 1 (1969), pp. 2-6; Plutarch, *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, ed. and trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch: Moralia* (16 vols, Cambridge MA, 1927-2004), v, §§419.e-f.

[129] Carver, 'Early Scottish Monasteries and Prehistory', p. 345, n. 63; Stephen Carter, 'Inchmarnock in Prehistory', in Lowe, *Inchmarnock*, pp. 61-8; Heather F. James and Peter Yeoman, *Excavations at St Ethernan's Monastery, Isle of May, Fife 1992-7* (Perth, 2008), p. 13; Jerry O'Sullivan and Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Inishmurray. Monks and Pilgrims in an Atlantic Landscape: Archaeological Survey and Excavations 1997-2000* (2 vols, Cork, 2008), i, pp. 199, 293, 316-18

[130] Defined by John Carey, 'Time, Space, and the Otherworld', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 7 (1987), p. 1, as any 'place inhabited by supernatural beings and itself exhibiting supernatural characteristics'. Note that the 'otherworld' is a modern academic coinage: Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Some Celtic Otherworld Terms', in A.T.E. Matonis and Daniel F. Melia (eds.), *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture: A Festschrift for Eric P. Hamp* (Van Nuys CA, 1990), pp. 60-1.

[131] Carey, 'Time, Space, and the Otherworld', p. 7: it also 'exists in no definable special relationship with the mortal realm'. John Carey, however, is cautious about a general pre-Christian 'otherworld' being found in the ocean in the Irish tradition, emphasising the Christian background to the *Immram Brain* and the *Echtrae Chonnlai* as being the inspiration for such an 'otherworld' appearing in the ocean: 'The Location of the Otherworld in Irish Tradition', *Éigse*, 19:1 (1982), pp. 36-43.

[132] *Tochmarc Becfhola*, ed. and trans. Máire Bhreathnach, 'A New Edition of *Tochmarc Becfhola*', *Éiru*, 35 (1984), §§7-9.

> them, just like all the other men on the island. They kept sailing around the coast, and when the man of their company came past Bran, his friends would call out to him. He did not call back to them, but simply stared at them, and howled with laughter at them. The name of this island is the Island of Joy. They left him there.[133]

To enter the sea was to put yourself at risk of encountering 'otherworld' forces; even the theft of other people's goods that fell to the bottom of the sea or a lake was permitted from such 'places of terror'.[134] Pre-Christian Ireland seems to have ritualised such watery 'otherworlds' by consigning religious offerings to them.[135] Early Christian missionaries may have sought out these 'otherworld' portals to prove the power of their faith over such environments. Tírechán stated that Patrick Christianised many pagan holy wells. Archaeological excavations at one such well discovered that an early Irish church took over the site.[136] Secular magnates could have built crannogs, settlements on artificial islands, in part to harness these portals to the 'otherworld', and to demonstrate that a king had the right to act as a mediator between the physical and supernatural realms: making himself a symbol of the union between land and people.[137] Ecclesiasts may have seen islands as an opportunity to do something similar, and the discovery of a medieval book shrine on a crannog near

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[133] *Immram Brain*, §61: *Luidi Bran óad íarom conda accae in n-insi. Imráat immecúairt ocus slóg már oc ginaig ocus gárechtaig. Doécitis uili Bran ocus a muintir. Ocus ní antais fria n-acaldaim. Adaigtis treftecha gáire foo. Fóidis Bran fer dia muintir isin n-insi. Reris lea chéliu ocus adacht ginaig foo amal doíni inna hinse olchene. Imráat in n-insi immecúairt. In tan dotéged a fer muintire sech Bran, atnglaitis a chocéli. Nís n-aicilledsom immurgu acht dosnécad nammá, ocus adaiged ginaig foo. Is ed ainm inna hinse so Inis Subai. Fanácabsat and íarom*; *id*., ed. and trans. Séamus Mac Mathúna, *Immram Brain: Bran's Journey to the Land of the Women* (Tübingen, 1985), §61.
[134] Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 148: lakes with monsters in them are such places of terror.
[135] Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age* (London, 1994), pp. 182-5; Seán Daffy, 'A Site for Sore Eyes: A Hiberno-Roman Curative Cult at Golden, Co. Tipperary', *Archaeology Ireland*, 16:2 (2002), pp. 8-9; Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §39.
[136] Charles Doherty, 'Kingship in Early Ireland', in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin, 2005), pp. 7-9; Eamonn P. Kelly, 'Antiquities from Irish Holy Wells and Their Wider Context', *Archaeology Ireland*, 16:2 (2002), pp. 24-8; Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §§26, 31, 34, 39. While they do not believe this pattern of conversion should be 'excluded', O'Sullivan *et al*. are less convinced: *Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400-1100*, pp. 144-5. These holy wells may have served a crucial function in baptism: Niamh Whitfield, 'A Suggested Function for the Holy Well?', in Minnis and Roberts (eds.), *Text, Image, Interpretation*, pp. 499-503, 505-13.
[137] Aidan O'Sullivan, 'The Social and Ideological Role of Crannogs in Early Medieval Ireland' (PhD Thesis, University of Maynooth, 2004), p. 155. O'Sullivan does state however that this was in a Christianised context.

Toneymore on Lough Kinale may support this notion.[138] Islands would have been the perfect frontier between this world and the 'otherworld' in their very topography, between land and water.[139] Perhaps one reason that islands were given to early churchmen by kings was to test this new faith, seeing how it would fare when encountering dangerous 'otherworld' forces. It is striking that the island of Tech Duinn, home to the folkloric ruler of the dead, is not far from Skellig Michael, and the estates of another island monastery, Inis Úasal, included a large barrow and bordered a grove called 'the Grove of Blood'.[140]

Yet contrary to this paradigm that emphasises confrontation with existing religious ideas, early Irish Christians may have tried to integrate these 'otherworld' islands and their traditional beliefs into their new faith.[141] Some evidence even suggests that Columba's saintliness, and thus perhaps also his island monastery, was constructed using these pre-Christian ideas. The author of the *Amrae Coluimb Chille* lamented the loss of Columba with these descriptions:

> He renounced his eye's desire,
> The noble, austere sage (*suí*) of Christ.[142]

Here the Irish word '*suí*', 'one who sees well', was used. Translated as 'sage' by Jacopo Bisagni this term was used for one of the traditional orders of Irish learning meaning 'seer', yet it came to be associated with ecclesiastical scholars and the

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[138] Eamonn P. Kelly, 'The Lough Kinale Book-Shrine', in R. Michael Spearman and John Higgitt (eds.), *The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 168-74.
[139] Ó Carragáin, 'The View from the Shore', p. 22.
[140] Some folklore traditions also associated the Skelligs directly with dead souls: Käte Müller-Lisowski, 'Contributions to a Study in Irish Folklore: Traditions About Donn', *Béaloideas*, 18:1 (1948), pp. 142-3, 149; Ó Carragáin, 'The View from the Shore', p. 24. Tomás Ó Carragáin, while noting the dangerous connotations of such sites, has some reservations: *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, pp. 89-90.
[141] This is one of the essential arguments of Ó Carragáin; *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, pp. 58-63; *id*., 'The View from the Shore', p. 24.
[142] *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §vi.9-10:
> *Rir accobur a súla,*
> *suí slán cres Críst*.

*Cf.* Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, pp. 272-3, 410.

highest grades of poets.[143] T.M. Charles-Edwards has linked Columba's power of seeing to *imbas for-osna*, 'the embracing vision that illuminates', held by pagan seers of the mythic past.[144] This link may have also been reflected in Adomnán's characterisation of Columba. In one episode in the *Life*, the saint explained his prophetic abilities to one of his monks:

> 'There are some, however very few, to whom divine grace has granted this, that they may see clearly and most visibly, even the entire circle of the whole earth, with the surrounding ocean and sky, in one and the same moment, as if under one beam of sunlight, in the miraculously expanded bosom of the mind'.[145]

Iona, an island portal where the supernatural power of the 'otherworld' was closer to reality than in other environmental contexts, could facilitate many more such demonstrations of 'good seeing', including conversations with angels, and observing the battles of devils.[146]

Though there may be some similarity between Adomnán's description of Columba's prophetic abilities and the pre-Christian *imbas for-osna*, the closest parallel is with Gregory the Great's account of St Benedict's visionary abilities in his *Dialogues*.[147]

> The whole world was brought before his eyes, as if collected under a single beam of sunlight. [...] Heaven and earth were not shrunk, but his mind's eye expanded. He, seized in God, could see without difficulty everything that lay beneath God.[148]

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[143] Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, pp. 272-3; *Bretha Nemed I*, ed. and trans. Liam Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar: The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1987), ll. 31, 71 (pp. 20-4, 184).
[144] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 192-3.
[145] *VC*, §i.43: *Sunt nonnulli quamlibet pauci admodum quibus divina hoc contulit gratia, ut etiam totum totius terrae orbem, cum ambitu ociani et caeli, uno eodemque momento quasi sub uno solis radio mirabiliter laxato mentis sinu clare et manifestissime speculentur*.
[146] *VC*, §§iii.6, iii.8, iii.10, iii.16, iii.22.
[147] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 192-3; Brüning, 'Adamnan's *Vita Columbae*', p. 250.
[148] Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, §§ii.35.3, ii.35.7: *omnis etiam mundus, velut sub uno solis radio collectus, ante oculos eius adductus est. [...] non caelum et terra contracta est, sed videntis animus dilatatus, qui, in Deo raptus, videre sine difficultate potuit omne quod infra Deum est*.

Beyond the linguistic similarities, Columba's visions of devils and angels could have been in the tradition of previous confessor saints who achieved similar levels of supernatural sight.[149] By the period of the *Amrae Coluimb Chille*'s composition, all the learned classes of Ireland had become imbued with Christian values and learning, potentially even becoming part of a unitary 'para-clerical' elite with large overlap between traditional learned orders and the priesthood.[150] Columba's power of good seeing, while perhaps drawing on some amount of pre-Christian memory, was not gained by traditional druidic training but instead through his knowledge of scripture, his connection to Christ, and by the grace of God.[151] Prophets in the Old Testament were also called 'seers', and scholars have shown that the early Irish understood their pre-Christian past as a reflection of the Israelites awaiting the coming of Christ.[152] The monk who composed the *Amrae Coluimb Chille* came from this educated Christian milieu, and they may have used a term like 'seer' to reflect Columba's encapsulation, in the image of Christ, of the unity between Old and New Testaments: hence he was a 'seer of Christ', the New Law written upon the Old. Columba's ocean voyages and island home made him praiseworthy in the eyes of the poem's

[149] Including those Adomnán read: Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, §§8-10; Constantius of Lyon, *Vita Germani*, §32; Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, §14.
[150] Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland', in T.W. Moody (ed.), *Nationality and the Pursuit of National Independence* (Belfast, 1978), pp. 18-21; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Aidan Breen, 'The Laws of the Irish', *Peritia*, 3 (1984), pp. 394-405; Johnston, *Literacy and Identity*, pp. 138-44. *Cf.* Proinsias Mac Cana, '*Regnum* and *Sacerdotium*: Notes on Irish Tradition', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 65 (1979), pp. 444-6; Proinsias Mac Cana, 'The Rise of the Later Schools of *Filidheacht*', *Ériu*, 25 (1974), pp. 134-9.
[151] *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, §§v.2-16, vi.3-4, vi.9-10; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 192-3.
[152] 1 Sam. 9:9, 9:18-19; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Irish Vernacular Law and the Old Testament', in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds.), *Irland und die Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission = Ireland and Christendom: the Bible and the Missions* (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 284-307; Kim McCone, 'Dubthach maccu Lugair and a Matter of Life and Death in the Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*', *Peritia*, 5 (1986), pp. 10-18; Kim McCone, 'A Tale of Two Ditties: Poet and Satirist in *Cath Maige Tuired*', in Ó Corráin, Breatnach, and McCone (eds.), *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*, pp. 132-9.

author, not for the values such environments had in Ireland's pagan past, but because of the radical new ethos Christianity imparted.

The best avenue for comparison between Iona and Irish island monasticism comes from examining the common impact of the ocean on the sustainability of island monasteries. Archaeological reports on the monastic occupation of Church Island showed that some of the food that the monks were consuming must have been imported from the mainland, as was the peat they used for fuel.[153] Found among the faunal evidence were a mix of wild animals and seafood, but also terrestrial staples such as ox, sheep, goat, and horse, that could not have occupied the small 'rock'.[154] While some farming was done on the island's terraces, supplemented possibly with farming on the neighbouring isle of Beginish, this would have produced only a meagre existence that was not equal to the occupation of the island.[155] Much the same can be said when looking at excavations of Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry. While there is some evidence for domestic arable farming and the capture of wild fauna, the midden remains have pointed to the monks' diet needing some outside imports.[156] Recent discussions of Skellig Michael have emphasised its relationship to its estates and mainland connections. It has even been suggested that the island was only occupied seasonally, or by a rotating cast of monks sharing time with a mainland site.[157] Excavations on the island of Illaunloughan Co. Kerry found that this monastery also had to rely substantially on imports: significantly grain as well as

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[153] O'Kelly, 'Church Island Near Valencia, Co. Kerry', pp. 130-1.
[154] *Ibid*.
[155] Ó Corráin, 'The Early Irish Churches', pp. 339-40.
[156] Bourke, Hayden, and Lynch, *Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry and South Peak*, pp. 466-8; Hamilton-Dyer, 'Bird and Fish Bones', pp. 437-49; Murray, 'The Mammal Bones', pp. 425-36; Murray, 'The Marine Molluscs', pp. 450-1. There is little evidence that arable farming was conducted on the island. Also, while archaeologists have argued that pigs, goats, and sheep were kept on Skellig Michael, it would be difficult to maintain a successful arable programme while having these animals around: see above, Chapter One, p. 53.
[157] Paul MacCotter, 'Medieval Land Divisions of Peninsular Corcu Duibne', in Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, p. 294; Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, pp. 99-100.

meat.[158] They also suggest that the monastery relied on a relationship with the mainland, either with royal powers, or perhaps a monastic mother house.[159] However Emily Murray and Finbar McCormick have singled out the high presence of wild animal consumption (fish, birds, seal, deer, molluscs) on Illaunloughan, something common to all of the above island monasteries, as showing that these monks were striving to be as self-sufficient as possible.[160] This may have been in response to seasonal shortages, or the unreliability of those imports necessary to maintain these islands.

These are all dietary characteristics shared with Iona which were highlighted in the first chapter as evidence for the challenges that were created by ocean insularity.[161] Iona has in fact been placed alongside Illaunloughan for comparison to look for commonalities between the 'food economies of Atlantic island monasteries'.[162] Not only was the founding of Irish island monasteries perhaps predicated on sponsorship from mainland powers, it may be that the continual relationship with such sponsors, and the mainland more generally, was grounded in the environmental conditions created by insularity. This did not just exist in the insular word, Lérins relied on the bishops of Fréjus to support the monastery's establishment, but these bishops also kept the monastery supplied with the provisions that allowed it to prosper.[163] Crucially however, one conclusion made by Murray, McCormick, and Plunkett in their comparison between Iona and Illaunloughan was that there was a significant economic disparity between these two

[158] Murray and McCormick, 'Environmental Analysis and the Food Supply', pp. 67-80. The meat that may have been domestic to the island or nearby is also evidence that this was a marginal environment, with the sheep teeth showing hypoplasia, a condition in animals reflecting malnourishment.
[159] *Ibid*. See also, White Marshall and Walsh, *Illaunloughan Island*, pp. 130-3.
[160] Murray and Finbar McCormick, 'Environmental Analysis and the Food Supply', pp. 79-80.
[161] See above, Chapter One, pp. 66-8.
[162] Murray, McCormick, and Plunkett, 'The Food Economies of Atlantic Island Monasteries', pp. 179-88.
[163] See above, pp. 210-11.

sites: 'two extremes of monastic settlement'.[164] Iona was the mother house of a large monastic *familia*. In contrast, Illaunloughan, and the other Irish island monasteries discussed were all hermitages or smaller institutions, almost certainly economically dependent on a mother house or a similar high-status site to Iona. This may reflect the institutional organisation of Iona and the particular connection it had to its ocean environment.

Island Monasticism in Britain

One might assume that the character of Scottish island monasticism was shaped substantially by the impact of Columba and the monks of Iona. Adomnán's *Life of Columba* is one of the few written sources that mentions some early island monasteries in the Hebrides. Most of these were daughter houses of Iona: Hinba,[165] Elen,[166] and Campus Lunge on Tiree, as well as those other monasteries that were founded on the same island.[167] Rum may have also housed a monastery given the

[164] Murray, McCormick, and Plunkett, 'The Food Economies of Atlantic Island Monasteries', pp. 186-7.
[165] Many locations for Hinba have been postulated (Canna, Colonsay, Eileach an Naoimh, Gunna, Jura, Oronsay, somewhere in the Outer Hebrides, or even somewhere inland near Loch Awe), but while the consensus has shifted towards Colonsay or Oronsay, it is still a matter of debate: Beatrice Widell, 'Hinba Revisited: A New Attempt to Trace St Columba's Lost Monastery', *Church Archaeology*, 19 (2019), pp. 13-23; Charles-Edwards, 'Iona and the Sea', pp. 13-15; John Lorne Campbell, *Canna: The Story of a Hebridean Island*, ed. Hugh Cheape, 5th edn (Edinburgh, 2014), pp. 1-7; Pamela O'Neill, 'When Onomastics Met Archaeology: A Tale of Two Hinbas', *Scottish Historical Review*, 87:1 (2008), pp. 26-41; Reeves, *The Life of St Columba*, p. 87, n. b; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 194; Skene, *The Life of St Columba*, pp. 318-19; W.D. Lamont, 'Where Was Adamnan's Hinba?', *Notes and Queries of the Society of West Highland and Island Historical Research*, 7 (1978), pp. 3-6; *id*., 'Hinba Once More', *Notes and Queries of the Society of West Highland and Island Historical Research*, 12 (1980), pp. 10-15; *id*., 'Hinba Once More (Concluded)', *Notes and Queries of the Society of West Highland and Island Historical Research*, 13 (1980), pp. 19-23. I follow William Watson in suggesting Jura because of its place on the route to Ireland, the topography of Loch Tarbert, but also because it would be closer to, if not in, Cenél nGabráin territory; some of whom Columba excommunicated while on Hinba (*VC*, §§ii.24, iii.17): *Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, pp. 81-4; *cf.* O'Neill, 'A Tale of Two Hinbas', p. 32.
[166] Reeves, *The Life of St Columba*, pp. 127-8 n. b; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 250; Skene, *The Life of St Columba*, pp. 324-5; *VC*, §ii.18.
[167] Aidan MacDonald, 'Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* and the Early Churches of Tiree', in Wooding *et al*. (eds.), *Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, pp. 219-36; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 107; *VC*, §§i.30, i.36, ii.18, iii.8.

recorded death of Beccán of Rum in the annals of Iona, potentially to be equated with the poet Beccán mac Luigdech.[168] Adomnán also mentioned that Columba and Baithéne visited Eigg and Skye: at least the first housed a monastery.[169] It is notable that Adomnán, except for a short reference to other communities on Tiree, did not mention any island monasteries independently founded in Dál Riata or Pictland, nor island daughter houses of other Irish monasteries. Was he deliberately obscuring a more heterogeneous and vibrant island-monastic culture that existed in Scotland outside the Columban *familia*?

James Fraser has argued in favour of decentring the impact of Columba and the influence of his monasteries in northern Britain. While he has dismissed the pseudo-historical account of St Ninian's conversion of the Southern Picts, likely an eighth-century work, Fraser has stressed the early start of Christianisation among the Picts.[170] Key pieces of evidence include St Patrick's account of 'apostate' Picts and Christian Britons, if bad ones, around the Firth of Clyde, as well as a Christian funerary stone found at Whithorn dedicated to 'Latinus' and opening with 'We praise You, the Lord'.[171] Island monasticism may have even been a key expression of this early process of Christianisation in Scotland. Excavations on the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth have discovered what has been interpreted as a potentially fifth-

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[168] See above, Chapter Three, pp. 144-5.
[169] Aidan MacDonald, 'Two Major Early Monasteries of Scottish Dalriata: Lismore and Eigg', *Scottish Archaeological Forum*, 5 (1973), pp. 57-64; *id*., 'Iona's Style of Government Among the Picts and Scots: The Toponymic Evidence of Adomnán's *Life of Columba*', *Peritia*, 4 (1985), p. 176; *AU*, §§617.1, 725.7, 752.2; Thomas Owen Clancy, 'St Donnan of Eigg: Context and Cult', Eigg History Society (19-20 Apr. 2015), https://www.eigg-history.org/index.asp?pageid=616291 (25 Sep. 2025); Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 388; *VC*, §§i.33, iii.18.
[170] Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 83-93.
[171] Katherine Forsyth, '*Hic Memoria Perpetua*: The Early Inscribed Stones of Southern Scotland in Context', in Sally M. Foster and Morag Cross (eds.), *Able Minds and Practiced Hands: Scotland's Early Medieval Sculpture in the 21st Century* (Leeds, 2005), pp. 115-17; *eadem*, 'The Latinus Stone: Whithorn's Earliest Christian Monument', in Murray (ed.), *St Ninian and the Earliest Christianity in Scotland*, pp. 19-41; Patrick, *Epistola ad Milites Corotici*, ed. and trans. Howlett, *The Letters of Patrick*, §2.

century monastery, with some evidence of pre-historic burial and religious practice.[172] Burials and archaeological finds at Hallow Hill, St Andrews, may also be evidence for an early Christian community.[173] Given that, as recorded by Bede, the Southern Picts claimed to have accepted Christianity earlier than those in the north and west, this evidence might be taken as proof for an indigenous and perhaps diverging tradition of island monasticism and Christianity unlike that practised among the Columban foundations.[174] Martin Carver has made this argument. Interpreting the excavations at the Pictish monastery of Portmahomack on the Tarbat Ness peninsula, seen as a semi-island, Carver suggested that the early monks not only drew on pre-Columban ideas, but also pre-Christian ones. These native Pictish traditions may have ascribed places bounded by water with sacred characteristics.[175] Even if the island monastic culture of Scotland was not indigenous, Fraser has hinted that perhaps Gallo-Roman missionaries may have been the first to convert the archipelago of Argyll, bringing a Lerinian model of island monasticism directly with them.[176]

Iona may have also had direct rivals stationed on other Dálriatan islands. Using evidence from the *Iona Chronicle*, Fraser has elevated Kingarth,[177] on the Isle of Bute, as the most important ecclesiastical community to the Cenél Comgaill

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[172] James and Yeoman, *Excavations at St Ethernan's Monastery*, pp. 13, 173-7.
[173] Edwina Proudfoot and Christopher Aliaga-Kelly, 'Discusssion', in Edwina Proudfoot, 'Excavations at the Long Cist Cemetery on the Hallow Hill, St Andrews, Fife, 1975-7', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 126 (1996), pp. 440-1, 447.
[174] Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 90, 111; *HE*, §§iii.4.
[175] Carver, 'Early Scottish Monasteries and Prehistory', pp. 344-51.
[176] Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 106. Fraser based his suggestion on potential parallels between Gallo-Roman cross forms, those found on the Kilmory Oib stone, and the cave carvings at Eilean Mor as discussed by Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests*, pp. 368-71.
[177] Kingarth may have first been a British religious community before the area became Gaelicised: Gilbert Márkus, *The Place-Names of Bute* (Donington, 20120, pp. 20-4, 222-3.

kindred of Dál Riata,[178] and he has also argued that the monastery on the island of Lismore was the chief religious community for the Cenél Loairn. If either of these two kindreds had dominated kingship of Dál Riata rather than the Cenél nGabráin, Columba's principal patrons in Fraser's opinion, they could have supplanted Iona as the most significant monastery in early Scottish history.[179] High-class sculpture and cemeteries show that the monastery on Lismore was a site of some prominence during the early medieval period, sharing the island with secular fortifications and close to the royal seat of the Cenél Loairn at Dunollie.[180] Indeed, Lismore sat in the 'cockpit of the territory of Lorn', at the 'crossroads' between Dál Riata and the main highway up the Great Glen to Pictland.[181] Likewise, excavations at Kingarth found shards of potential E-ware along with evidence of artistic and craft work, showing the wealth of this hybrid monastery and episcopal-see from its earliest settlement; occupying some of the most fertile and wealthy land in the region and close-by to local rulers.[182] Most significantly, archaeological work on the island of Inchmarnock off the coast of Bute discovered a substantial collection of medieval sculpture, evidence of workshops and metalworking, but most interestingly a large number of inscribed slate stones were found: these potentially depicted Viking raids, were used for board games, and featured writing in ogham, Latin, and Gaelic. The island has

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[178] This was the kindred of King Conall mac Comgaill, the king who potentially donated Iona to Columba, and it was subsumed by the Cenél nGabráin at one time, see above, Chapter Two, pp. 101-2 nn. 89, 91-2.
[179] Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 105-6, 157-8, 337-8, 372; Fraser, 'Strangers on the Clyde', pp. 111-20.
[180] Clare Ellis, 'Data Structure Report: Archaeology of the Glebe Lands, Isle of Lismore', *©Argyll Archaeology* (2019), p. 43; Ian Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2001), pp. 121-2; McNamara, 'Tracing the Community of Comgall', pp. 213-83; RCAHMS, *Argyll*, Lorn, §§126, 140, 146-7.
[181] MacDonald, 'Lismore and Eigg', pp. 47-8; McNamara, 'Tracing the Community of Comgall', p. 261.
[182] Denis Pringle, 'The Medieval Parish Churches of the Isle of Bute: St Blane's, Kingarth, and St Mary's, Rothesay', *Scottish Archaeological Journal*, 22:2 (2000), p. 124; Lloyd Laing, Jennifer Laing, and David Longley, 'The Early Christian and Later Medieval Ecclesiastical Site at St Blane's, Kingarth, Bute', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 128 (1998), pp. 557-63.

been interpreted as possibly an early 'elementary school'.[183] Taken together, these island foundations could show some evidence for a 'vibrant' culture of literacy, art, and monasticism on Scottish islands that did not have to be under the influence of Iona, share its same cultural or religious underpinnings, or follow its model. Today, historians only focus on Iona because the stories it told, primarily about itself, are the sources that have survived.[184]

There are some useful comments that can be made about these interpretations of Scottish island or semi-island monasticism. The evidence is not overwhelming enough to suggest these islands were chosen for religious communities because of indigenous British and Pictish beliefs. The peninsular monastery of Portmahomack evoked an island environment because it was well integrated into the late antique and Christian ideals of monasticism shared and promoted by Iona. Portmahomack was almost certainly founded by Ionan monks, and shared Iona's enclosure lay-out, use of roads to shape holy topography, and even had similar dietary practices.[185] The long-cist burials on the Isle of May used to suggest early British monks occupied the islands of the Scottish east coast cannot be dated accurately to the fifth century as suggested by Fraser.[186] At 2σ (95% probability), the earliest of these graves can be dated to between AD 430 – 853, AD 400 – 790, and AD 400 – 660, even at 1σ (68% probability) the earliest of those graves can only be dated to between AD 434 – 610.[187] These potential monks all could have been participants in St Columba's

[183] Lowe, *Inchmarnock*, pp. 249-65.
[184] Fraser, 'Strangers on the Clyde', p. 102; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 25-6.
[185] Carver, 'Early Scottish Monasteries and Prehistory', pp. 343-4; Martin Carver, 'An Iona of the East: The Early-Medieval Monastery at Portmahomack, Tarbat Ness', *Medieval Archaeology*, 48:1 (2004), pp. 23-5; on diet, see above, Chapter One, pp. 60-2 n. 190; *cf.* Martin Carver, Justin Garner-Lahire, and Cecily Spall, *Portmahomack on Tarbat Ness: Changing Ideologies in Nort-East Scotland, Sixth to Sixteenth Century AD* (Edinburgh, 2016), p. 335.
[186] Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 90
[187] James and Yeoman, *Excavations at St Ethernan's Monastery*, pp. 30-2.

mission to convert the Southern Picts, potentially using the British contacts of the saint. The first monk to die on Iona was recorded as a Briton.[188] The fourth abbot of Iona, Virgno (Fergnae) *r*. AD 605 – 623, a Briton and monk of Iona during Columba's lifetime, could have been a crucial asset in the saint's mission to the Southern Picts.[189] When the bishop Aidan founded Lindisfarne, the tidal island was recorded in the *Iona Chronicle* by its British name Medgoit, suggesting some local knowledge of the area by the Ionan missionaries or their contacts.[190]

Similarly, the attempt to minimise the centrality and importance of Iona in Dál Riata ignores some contrary documentary and archaeological evidence. Take the example of Lismore. Fraser has stated that Lismore, rather than Iona, was the principal church of the Cenél Loairn, owing in part to Adomnán not mentioning Lismore.[191] Adomnán did however paint a picture of close cooperation between the Cenél Loairn and Iona, that did suggest a close relationship between this kindred and the monastery. Adomnán even mentioned that he personally stayed among the Cenél Loairn for several days.[192] This episode, among the many other local interactions Columba and Adomnán had with the Cenél Loairn in the *Life*, has been used by Gilbert Márkus to suggest that Ionan monks had a mental map of these nearby territories in which they acted as 'pastors' and could expect hospitality.[193] Márkus believed these episodes were part of a charm offensive led by Adomnán, and an ultimately unsuccessful one. Instead, I have argued in the first and second chapters of this thesis that the attention given to the Cenél Loairn represented the vital role

[188] *VC*, §iii.6.
[189] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 307-8; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 389; *VC*, §§iii.19; *cf*. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 110-11.
[190] *AU*, §632.4; Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, §632.4 n. 2.
[191] Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 105-6, 250.
[192] *VC*, §ii.45.
[193] Márkus, 'Iona: Monks, Pastors and Missionaries', pp. 116-20, 131, 136-7.

this kindred played in maintaining the agricultural sustainability of Iona.[194] Returning to Lismore; in her discussion of stonework found on that island, Carolyn McNamara described the close similarities between shards of a free-standing cross with one found on Iona (the St John's Cross), and others on Islay (the Kilnave Cross and the Kildalton Cross), showing close links that existed between these isles.[195] Significantly, Catherine Swift has argued that those same Islay crosses marked out the estates or religious communities that Iona had rights to collect rents from.[196] Perhaps Lismore was similarly a subordinate monastic community which provided rents to Iona, like Tiree.[197] The evidence for both Kingarth's and Inchmarnock's authority, independence, and significance can similarly be unravelled.[198]

I do however think that Iona stands out from these other examples of Scottish island monasticism, and early Scottish monasteries more generally. Richard Sharpe has reflected on why a wealth of written sources have survived for Iona, whereas virtually none have survived for the rest of Scotland's early monasteries. He argued that Iona's texts have survived because the island kept itself integrated into the Irish Church and connected to its Irish daughter monasteries.[199] This, alongside 'St Columba's personal greatness, and because of the important family connections and personal achievements of his successors, meant that Iona was not marginalised' as

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[194] See above, Chapter One, pp. 75-83.
[195] McNamara, 'Tracing the Community of Comgall', pp. 230-48.
[196] Catherine Swift, 'Irish Influence on Ecclesiastical Settlements in Scotland', pp. 322-30.
[197] See above, Chapter One, p. 73.
[198] Regarding Kingarth, one should draw out the implications of it being a church and monastery dominated by a single family (perhaps a small church solely providing pastoral needs as was seen in Ireland: Ó Corráin, 'The Early Irish Churches', pp. 333-9; *cf.* Lowe, *Inchmarnock*, p. 263), as well as the fact Kingarth saints were venerated on Iona with Columba potentially being venerated at Kingarth: Aidan MacDonald, 'Early Kingarth', in Laing, Laing, and Donley, 'The ecclesiastical site at St Blane's', pp. 553-5; Fraser, 'Strangers on the Clyde', p. 113, nn. 52-3. If, as suggested by the archaeology, Inchmarnock was a small centre for early education where one would develop literacy, the implication would be that those trained on the island would go on to contribute to a larger monastic centre like Iona: note esp., Lowe, *Inchmarnock*, p. 263.
[199] Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 25-6.

other Scottish island monasteries like Lismore, Kingarth, Portmahomack, the Isle of May, and Inchmarnock have been in both history and in the historiography. Unlike these other Scottish island monasteries, Iona grew and led an international network of monasteries that could preserve its texts and promote its achievements. A lottery was not held to decide which texts survived and which did not, and though chance may have played a big part in preserving certain historical sources, Iona's monks and abbots made their own luck. Even if some texts did not survive in Iona's Irish daughter houses, they may have still been preserved on the continent. This was the case for the earliest manuscript of the *Life of Columba* along with many copies of the Ionan poem *Altus Prosator*.[200] The memory of Columba and Iona would still also be captured in the Scottish landscape, Ionan placenames far outstripping those cults associated with Lismore and Kingarth.[201]

Island monasteries, while having natural characteristics for communities of monks seeking isolation from the world, were not a popular expression of Anglo-Saxon monasticism. Typically, islands were home to individual hermits more than monasteries in early medieval England.[202] The hermit Hereberht lived on an island in lake Derwentwater, now in the Lake District.[203] St Cuthbert chose the island of Farne to build his hermitage.[204] St Guthlac chose an island at Crowland in the fenlands of

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[200] Jean-Michel Picard, 'Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* and the Cult of Colum Cille in Continental Europe', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 98C (1998), p. 1-23; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 235-7. See also the recent discovery of a Berlin fragment of the *Life of Columba*: Stefanie Bellach, 'The Discovery of a New Continental Version: The Berlin Fragment of the *Vita Sancti Columbae Adamnani*', in Evemalm-Graham, with Clancy and Márkus (eds.), *Ì Chaluim Chille*, pp. 256-69.
[201] Compare: 'Columb Cille m. Feidlimid', Saints in Scottish Place-Names, https://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/saint.php?id=64 (8 May 2025); 'Bláán of Bute', Saints in Scottish Place-Names, https://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/saint.php?id=22 (8 May 2025); 'Mo Luóc m. Luchta of Lismore', Saints in Scottish Place-Names, https://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/saint.php?id=155 (8 May 2025).
[202] Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 97-9.
[203] *Vita Cuthberti Anonymae*, §iv.9.
[204] Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, §17.

Eastern England for his hermetic retreat.[205] In contrast, when St Aidan arrived in Northumbria, he chose the tidal island of Lindisfarne for what would become one of the most powerful monasteries of early Anglo-Saxon England. Bede claimed that Aidan chose the island of Lindisfarne precisely because 'as the tide ebbs and flows, this place is surrounded twice daily by the waves of the sea like an island and twice, when the shore is left dry, it becomes again attached to the mainland'.[206]

Semi-island monasteries were a more common form of English monasticism. Hartlepool like Lindisfarne was a tidal island.[207] Chertsey appears to have been a riverine island, possibly a semi-island, in the Thames.[208] The island of Selsey was in fact a peninsula.[209] Bosham was also a semi-island surrounded by 'woods and sea'.[210] Perhaps the regular choice of semi-islands reflected that monastic founders recognised the challenges that came with establishing a monastic community on an ocean island.[211] Instead, Anglo-Saxon island monasticism was largely defined by topographies that could capture some of the ascetic value and isolating power that islands had, without being completely surrounded by the ocean at every hour.[212] What is more, any monastery could be made into a kind of semi-island. The dual monastery of Wearmouth and Jarrow are interesting examples in this regard. Studies of the topography of Jarrow have shown that it was enclosed on the southern and eastern sides by a river bend, the Don, that led to the sea, and a tidal river, the Slake,

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[205] Felix, *Vita S. Guthlaci*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave, *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge, 1985), §§24-5.
[206] *HE*, §iii.3.
[207] The headland of Hartlepool where the monastic occupation existed was a tidal island during the Anglo-Saxon period as suggested by its Old English name '*Heruteu*', 'island of the hart': Robin Daniels, *Anglo-Saxon Hartlepool and the Foundations of English Christianity* (Hartlepool, 2007), pp. 3-4.
[208] Hanna Nüllen, '*Laetentur Insulae Multae*: Island Monasteries in the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*', in Signori (ed.), *Inselklöster – Klosterinseln*, p. 46; *HE*, §iv.4.
[209] *HE*, §iv.13.
[210] *Ibid*.
[211] See above, Chapter One.
[212] Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 96-110.

that fed into the Tyne, with that major river enclosing it to the north.[213] Marshes also surrounded the site to the south, and mudflats lay to the east, making the monastery difficult to access from all sides.[214] Work done at St Peter's at Wearmouth also revealed that the bend of the Wear dramatically enclosed the monastery on three sides during its medieval occupation.[215] The built environments of both monasteries also affected this goal of insularity: at Wearmouth the decorated stone entryway to the church displayed beasts to prospective visitors and may have served to protect against evil forces, or, further demarcate the chaotic and wild landscape that lay outside from the foretaste of the heavenly city within; at Jarrow, free standing crosses at the monastic boundaries may have been used to demarcate the sacred space of the ecclesiastical site.[216]

The creation of a kind of island space in this way, outside which dragons prowled, could be linked to the prophet Isaiah: 'in the dens where dragons dwell before, shall rise up the verdure of the reed and bulrush'.[217] These were the words that Bede drew on to describe how Cedd carved out a slice of the deserted and chaotic landscape, and remade it into the monastery of Lastingham, a holy island in the midst of a landscape of thieves and beasts.[218] The name Lastingham may in fact signal that its land was an island of cultivatable earth in a sea of moors.[219] Tomás Ó Carragáin argued that even if a monastery was not founded on an island, and instead

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[213] Rosemary Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow Monastic Sites* (2 vols, Swindon, 2005-2006), i, pp. 5-9.
[214] Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow*, i, p. 348; Sam Turner, Sarah Semple, and Alex Turner, *Wearmouth and Jarrow: Northumbrian Monasteries in an Historic Landscape* (Hatfield, 2013), pp. 115-17.
[215] Turner, Semple and Turner, *Wearmouth and Jarrow*, pp. 113-15.
[216] Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow*, ii, pp. 202-3; Turner, Semple, and Turner, *Wearmouth and Jarrow*, pp. 116-17, 136, 159-61.
[217] Is. 35:7.
[218] *HE*, §iii.23; Richard Morris, '"*Calami et Iunci*": Lastingham in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries', *Bulletin of International Medieval Research*, 11 (2005), pp. 3-12; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Foundation of Lastingham', *The Ryedale Historian*, 7 (1974), pp. 14-18.
[219] Victor Watts, 'The Place-Name Hexham: A Mainly Philological Approach', *Nomina*, 17 (1994), pp. 134-5.

was surrounded by cultivated land owned by powerful patrons and other religious foundations, wilderness could be cultivated around the site to make those foundations look more like isles.[220] Certainly the desert or island nature of Lastingham was also somewhat 'make-believe': it was close to a Roman road, and was previously a centre of Roman activity, though Bede was thinking symbolically rather than of any of these practicalities.[221] Christian spirituality gave the English a flexible language to define places as islands while avoiding real insularity. If any landscape could capture the ideal of an island, why found your monastery on an ocean island? Iona was significant because it maintained its social and religious significance while facing the challenges that came with an ocean environment: for many, the lived experience of a true island location was unimportant, you still could capture the spiritual ideals on land; Iona's monks wanted both the spiritual ideals of insularity and the reality.

There has been a growing focus on the impact of the landscape on the practice and experience of Christianity in the Anglo-Saxon Church. John Blair has argued that the 'landscape mattered more than architecture' in the 'vernacular culture' of early Christian England.[222] The choice of an island or semi-island location for a monastery would have been a lengthy and considered process that drew in Christian tradition and practice. Thomas Pickles has reflected on the great deal of symbolism that may have influenced Anglo-Saxon island monks in their choice of monastic environment.[223] A tidal island location like Hartlepool might have been

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[220] Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, p. 135.
[221] Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 194; Helen Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 34-7; Thomas Pickles, 'Anglo-Saxon Monasteries as Sacred Places: Topography, Exegesis and Vocation', in Jospeh Sterrett and Peter Thomas (eds.), *Sacred Text – Sacred Space: Architectural, Spiritual and Literary Convergences in England and Wales* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 49-50.
[222] Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 182.
[223] Pickles, 'Anglo-Saxon Monasteries as Sacred Places', pp. 40-44.

chosen because its monastic founders could envision their crossing of the transient land-bridge in parallel with the story of Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea: their insular monastic lives being a journey to the Promised Land, or connected to the imagery of baptism.[224] These biblical ideas certainly influenced how Iona's monks thought of their own island topography, but also the monks of Lérins, who prised their island paradise in explicitly Mosaic terms.[225] Helen Gittos has explored the multiple ways that landscapes could become holy and sacred: divine revelation; being made holy by a saint; transformed into holy landscapes through meditation on their significance; or consecrated through liturgical rites.[226] She has focused particularly on the Isle of Thanet as embodying the ways islands could become holy: God divinely inspired a hind to run around the entire isle to demarcate the lands of the monastery as sacred to it and inalienable; the footprints of St Mildrith that were captured in the stone of the isle affirmed the relationship between the island and the saint; and the continued exegetical reflection on that stone's meaning, and the miracles it produced for the community, all sacralised the island landscape.[227] While the island itself was not consecrated, these layered traditions deepened a clear system of Christian beliefs that saw meaning in insularity.

Deirdre O'Sullivan has highlighted the exegetical underpinnings of why Lindisfarne was chosen by Aidan for his monastery. The ebb and flow of the tide demonstrated the order and control God had over the world and the chaotic ocean. Even the topography of the island provided the monks with a parallel to Mount Nebo

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[224] Ex. 14:16-31; *HE*, §§iii.24, iv.23(21); Pickles, 'Anglo-Saxon Monasteries as Sacred Places', pp. 43-4.
[225] See above, Chapter One, p. 76 n. 272, and just above, 204-6.
[226] Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places*, p. 22.
[227] *Ibid*., pp. 19-31. The Mildrith legend may have also emphasised claiming the pagan island space for Christianity: Stephanie Hollis, 'The Minster-in-Thanet Foundation Story', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 27 (1998), pp. 46-52, n. 35.

overlooking the Promised Land, and pointing eastwards to contemplate Jerusalem.[228] St Columba similarly used the high places of Iona to converse with angels, deliver prophecy, and experience heavenly visions much like Moses on Nebo or Sinai.[229] The topography of Lindisfarne was also remarkably similar to Iona: 'both are small islands within a short distance of neighbouring land, open and treeless, with comparable surface areas, tracts of arable and pasture, some stretches of wasteland and a small area of high ground'.[230] The landscape memory of Iona may have been a crucial reason why Lindisfarne was chosen. While O'Sullivan downplays this and stressed that the shared exegetical imagery of islands could have been behind the choice of both, a landscape where one could act out the saintly model of Iona and Columba seems crucial. Practicing one's 'way of life, […] customs, and […] teaching' in the manner of 'Columba and his successors' in order to live a saintly life on Lindisfarne was important enough, according to Bede, that when this model was overturned with the Synod of Whitby, Colmán and his monks sought out another island where they could keep to their practices.[231] The institutional model exported by Iona included perhaps both spiritual practice and the correct choice of spiritual landscape.

If exegetical symbolism led monastic founders to choose island sites, and perhaps was intimately connected to Ionan spirituality, exegesis also allowed an author like Bede to see the spiritual flaws that came with the island monasticism of Iona. For Bede, the Christian mission to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth and amongst the isles, commanded by Christ, Isaiah, and in the Psalms, made

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[228] Deirdre O'Sullivan, 'Space, Silence and Shortage on Lindisfarne: The Archaeology of Asceticism', in Helena Hamerow and Arthur MacGregor (eds.), *Image and Power in the Archaeology of Early Medieval Britain: Essays in Honour of Rosemary Cramp* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 33-7; Deut. 34:1-4.
[229] Deut. 34:1-4; Ex. 19:1-3; *VC*, §§ii.4, iii.16, iii.22.
[230] O'Sullivan, 'Space, Silence and Shortage', p. 37.
[231] *HE*, §§iii.25-6, iv.4.

Britain's island geography eschatologically significant.[232] The Ionan community valued their island geography for the very same reasons.[233] Jennifer O'Reilly has argued that Bede even conceived of nations, monasteries, even individuals, as islands in this same framework, each needing to receive the gospel and exist in a constant state of reconversion that will re-join them to the body of the universal Church.[234] However Iona and its monks, by keeping to their traditions and not submitting to this reconversion, exemplified their island-monastic identity: becoming idolators to their own beliefs, and inhabiting the ignorant state that came before revelation (a punishment for the pride humanity demonstrated in building the tower of Babel).[235] In contrast, Cuthbert and Lindisfarne were held up by Bede as the ideal saint and community because their practice of ascetic isolation and humility was balanced with the pastoral care necessary to carry out the constant conversion the many isles needed. Lindisfarne was also strategically situated for the constant correction of Northumbria's rulers too: the royal seat at Bamburgh was visible from the island.[236] The topography of Lindisfarne echoed this ideal for Bede: an island that is constantly reconnecting to the mainland, experiencing a rebaptism in water daily, and properly facilitating the pastoral care its community could provide to the surrounding peoples.[237]

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[232] Acts 1:8; Isa. 49:1-12; Matt. 28:19; Ps. 96:1, 71:8-11; Jennifer O'Reilly, 'Islands and Idols at the Ends of the Earth: Exegesis and Conversion in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*', in *ead*., *History, Hagiography and Exegesis: Essays on Bede, Adomnán and Thomas Becket*, ed. Máirín MacCarron and Diarmuid Scully (Abingdon, 2019), pp. 37-52.
[233] See above, Chapter Two, pp. 135-40.
[234] O'Reilly, 'Islands and Idols', pp. 60-4. See also Eucherius above, pp. 207-8.
[235] O'Reilly, 'Islands and Idols', pp. 63-4; Gen. 7:1-9.
[236] Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, §§16-17, 24-6; Alan Thacker, 'Bede's Ideal of Reform', in Patrick Wormald, with the assistance of Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (ed.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 132-42, 146-9; Clare Stancliffe, 'Cuthbert and the Polarity between Pastor and Solitary', pp. 36-42.
[237] Pickles, 'Anglo-Saxon Monasteries as Sacred Places', pp. 43-4.

Insularity, or semi-insularity in England also provided social and economic advantages.[238] Lindisfarne, Hartlepool, and many other Northumbrian monasteries sat along a coastal highway that delivered people and goods up and down the east coast of England.[239] In one story Cuthbert used this coastal highway to sail as far north as Pictland.[240] This highway linked Lindisfarne to the burgeoning *wics* and *emporia* on the English east coast, giving the semi-insular monks and monasteries of Northumbria access to growing continental markets.[241] This route was important both religiously and economically: the journeys of Benedict Biscop connected Monkwearmouth-Jarrow to Rome and to the Roman goods that shaped the culture of this monastery and the kingdom of Northumbria. More practically, Roman goods could also be exchanged for lands.[242] This highway of connectivity gave a semi-island like Lindisfarne a level of accessibility that monastic authors might have tried to obscure, but it did keep a 'marginal' quality. Deirdre O'Sullivan, Kevin Walsh, and Tony Brown have examined the productivity of Lindisfarne to show that even if the island could be described as economically or agriculturally 'marginal', its relationship with mainland estates allowed the monastery to develop a system of sufficiency and success.[243] Lindisfarne with its extensive estates and landholdings acted in a unified system of exchange to overcome any agricultural shortfalls or

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[238] Stéphane Lebecq, 'The Role of the Monasteries in the Systems of Production and Exchange of the Frankish World Between the Seventh and the Beginning of the Ninth Centuries', in Inge Lyse Hansen and Chris Wickham (eds.), *The Long Eighth Century. Production, Distribution and Demand* (Leiden, 2000), pp. 124-31; Tim Pestell, *Landscapes of Monastic Foundation: The Establishment of Religious Houses in East Anglia, c.650-1200* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 52-6, 59-64.
[239] David Petts, 'Coastal Landscapes and Early Christianity in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria', *Estonian Journal of Archaeology*, 13:2 (2009), pp. 79-90.
[240] Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, §11.
[241] Christopher Ferguson, 'Re-Evaluating Early Medieval Northumbrian Contacts and the "Coastal Highway"', in David Petts and Sam Turner (eds.), *Early Medieval Northumbria: Kingdoms and Communities, 450-1100* (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 295-7.
[242] Bede, *Historia Abbatum*, §4.
[243] Even then, significant agricultural marginality only came after the early medieval occupation: Walsh, 'Early Medieval Landscapes: Lindisfarne', pp. 248-60; Brown *et al*., 'Marginality, multiple estates and environmental change', pp. 139-48.

imbalances, in the same way that Iona seems to have used its local ocean networks to connect it to nearby farmers and estates.[244] The additional challenges created by the ocean may have been significant. Ellen Arnold has examined the two hagiographies of Cuthbert written by Bede and the anonymous monk of Lindisfarne for their descriptions of this tidal island's environment. She has shown that the community of Lindisfarne paid particular attention to the island climate and its challenges that affected daily life, agricultural sustainability, and the violence of the ocean.[245] St Aidan, with the understanding he gained by living on Iona, may have sought out a semi-island environment because he wanted to avoid these challenges and the complete isolation created by the reliance on sailing and the weather. While still valuing Lindisfarne's island topography for symbolic or religious reasons, even a temporary connection to the mainland could give the monastery a stronger connection to the estates that could overcome the problems created by insularity.

## Conclusion

A great deal of the pastoral activity conducted by Aidan found him traveling by foot around Northumbria: in a show of humility, Aidan could do away with his horse and walk; Columba could not do without the boats he loved.[246] The archipelagic nature of the Hebrides and the North Atlantic world meant that daily sea travel was ingrained in the activity of Columba and Iona's monks. Iona was also a monastery situated on an ocean island, compared to the semi-island locations in England such as Lindisfarne. Being completely surrounded by the ocean created a greater degree of isolation compared to having a land-bridge, causeway, or one-side

[244] See above, Chapter Two, pp. 94-108.
[245] Ellen Arnold, 'Environmental History and Hagiography', in Samantha Khan Herrick (ed.), *Hagiography and the History of Latin Christendom, 500-1500* (Leiden, 2020), pp. 354-60.
[246] Beccán mac Luigdech, *Tiugraind Beccáin*, §19; *HE*, §iii.14.

of the monastery unenclosed. The difference in this relationship might be shown in how Ellen Arnold discussed the environmental perspective shown in Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* and the *Ecclesiastical History*. The subtitle 'Cuthbert and Lindisfarne' to a chapter on 'Environmental History and Hagiography' would suggest that the close relationship between Cuthbert's life on Lindisfarne and the environment of the tidal island would be the focus. Instead it was the saint's experiences at the hermitage of Farne that grabbed her attention, and provided her with the best examples of how the coastal landscape was crucial to how Bede understood Cuthbert: 'it was ill suited for human habitation'; 'it was shut in on the landward side by deep water and on the seaward side by the boundless ocean'; sailing away from the small isle three monks were '"shut in by the storm on every hand, and there was no hope of safety"'.[247] Still, Cuthbert found a spring of water on the island, and could cultivate his little patch of land. The oscillation between violent chaos and ordered peace that existed on Farne, a full island surrounded by the ocean, was what enthralled Bede and Arnold – the characteristic that separated Iona's experience of its insularity from many of the examples discussed in this chapter. Whereas a semi-island made the sea optional, the oceanicity of Iona was undeniable for its monks and formed a crucial part of their monastic identity, religious thought, and daily lives.

Iona's geography forced it to be dependent on imported food to supplement the productivity of the island. It shared this relationship with all the island monasteries discussed above. One way Iona stood out from this common experience of island insularity was that the monks seemed to have played an active role in retrieving these mainland resources. The flow of goods also moved up the economic

[247] Arnold, 'Environmental History and Hagiography', pp. 354-60; *HE*, §§iv.28(26), v.1; Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, §§17-19.

pyramid to the island of Iona, rather than downwards from a mainland mother house, church estate, or aristocratic patron to a small island community as was the norm in Ireland. The place of an island monastery in the hierarchy and model of monastic practice was thus flipped in the case of Iona. Lindisfarne offered the best parallel for Iona's economic and social status, but because Lindisfarne was a tidal island, not surrounded by the sea at every hour, it did not face the same challenges as Iona. All this may have had significant consequences for the economic and social relationship Iona had with its surrounding society.

When Bede spoke of the *paruchia* of Iona he mentioned that,

> [Iona] is accustomed to have a leader who is always a priest and an abbot, to the authority of whom, in an unusual manner, the entire province, even the bishops, are bound as to be subjects.[248]

The first chapter of this thesis stressed the relationship between Iona and local farmers that Adomnán and the Ionan abbots needed to maintain in order to solve the sustainability challenges created by the ocean. Adomnán especially emphasised the connection the monastery had to the Cenél Loairn. Perhaps as the monastery grew in population and social significance, it was required to expand its authority in the provinces it held pre-eminence over, particularly in Pictland and Dál Riata, and to increase the flow of renders to support the community and its activities. Some have attempted to apply Bede's characterisation of Iona to the structure of the Irish Church, or dismissed it, showing the clear evidence of continuing episcopal power.[249] Maybe, however, this structure remained an accurate depiction of Iona and

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[248] *HE*, §iii.4: *Habere autem solet ipsa insula rectorem semper abbatem presbyterum, cuius iuri et omnis prouincia et ipsi etiam episcopi ordine inusitato debeant esse subiecti*.

[249] Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 172-94; Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, pp. 57-90; Sharpe, 'Some Problems Concerning the Organization of the Early Irish Church', pp. 244-7, 258-70. Several Ionan abbots may have also been bishops, and there were bishops of Iona, complicating even the application of this model to Iona itself: *AU*, §712.1; Cormac Bourke, 'Cillíne Pontifex', *Innes Review*, 49:1 (1998), pp. 77-80; *id*., 'Fergna Epscop', *Innes Review*, 51:1 (2000), pp. 68-71; Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Guarantor List of *Cáin Adomnáin*', p. 191.

its own idiosyncratic system of monastic lordship. A mother house on an ocean island, in contrast to Irish parallels, needed to grow its *paruchia*, and hold close control over it, to meet the challenges of maintaining a monastery which otherwise would be limited by its size, connectivity, and agricultural productivity.

Some further evidence exists for this model. Aidan MacDonald has conducted a toponymic survey of the churches and monasteries mentioned by Adomnán in his *Life of Columba*. Adomnán named nine ecclesiastical sites that were found in the Irish and Pictish regions of Scotland, but hardly any of their names survive down to today.[250] In contrast, three out of the five monasteries that Adomnán named in Ireland survive in a form close to their current name.[251] MacDonald has taken this disparity as evidence to suggest that while Columban monasteries in Ireland (and Lindisfarne could be added also) were given a greater deal of autonomy, foundations in Dál Riata and Pictland were closely controlled by Iona so that any individual identity or activity they may have had was inhibited.[252] MacDonald hinted at the environmental foundation of this style of government: 'a hazardous sea-voyage separated [the Irish monasteries] from Iona'. I have argued above that the ocean should be seen as fundamentally a local force for connectivity, crucial in maintaining the relationships Iona had within Dál Riata, but its ability to link the community regionally or globally was limited.[253] These ultra-local seaways connected the monastery to the people and provisions that supplemented what could be produced on Iona, and overcame the limits on the monastery's sustainability. Unlike other island monasteries who shared this reliance on the mainland, I suggest

[250] MacDonald, 'Iona's Style of Government', pp. 177-8.
[251] *Ibid*., p. 182.
[252] *Ibid*., pp. 184-5; *cf*. David Dumville, 'Derry, Iona, England, and the Governance of the Columban Church', in Gerard O'Brien (ed.), *Derry and Londonderry: History and Society. Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County* (Dublin, 1999), pp. 99-107.
[253] See above, Chapter Two, pp. 137-40.

that the monks' command of the Dálriatan seaways, and the close control Iona had over nearby farmers, churches, and parts of its *paruchia*, was geared towards an economic model structured to overcome the island geography of the monastery. While this economic model was prompted by characteristics shared by many island monasteries throughout history and across regions, Iona was exceptional in its activity, size, and its true insularity. All these features set the community of Columba apart, showing how the close connection the monastery had with the ocean developed its strong and powerfully centralised organisational structure.[254]

[254] Perhaps this is just an 'Oxonian' 'predilection for big government': Dumville, '*Cethri prímchenéla Dáil Riata*', p. 172.

# Conclusions

This thesis began by demonstrating the profound effect the ocean had on the topography and climate of Iona throughout history. The close relationship between the ocean and the climate is in greater focus than ever before, and the first chapter of the thesis showed how both long-term realities and dramatic changes influenced life on Iona. The dominant westerly winds, increased precipitation, soils, flora, and fauna were all connected to the behaviour of the ocean, with significant implications for the agricultural programme and settlement of the Hebridean island. The argument for many years has been that the Ionan community was agriculturally successful and self-sustaining. By combining climatic and archaeological evidence I have suggested that this self-sustainability should not be taken for granted. The ocean played a large part in restricting the sustainability of Iona, but it was also the means of overcoming those limitations. Using the ocean to connect the monastery to the surrounding farms and communities of Dál Riata, the Ionan monks built relationships of reciprocity that could save them when their food supplies ran low. Even the shortest journeys across the Sound of Iona to Mull required the skills of seamanship. This thesis went on to stress the local importance of ocean-connectivity to overcoming the agricultural limits of Iona, but also in developing the community's social network and achieving its political aims. As the distances of journeys increased, the ocean became more a force for isolation than for connectivity. Accounts that linked Iona to the wider medieval world, show a concern for the 'global' in the minds of its monks that did not exist in reality.

The understanding the Ionan monks had of their place in the ocean was built upon many layers of thought: classical, biblical, patristic, and Irish. Yet the importance of the immediate ocean environment to Iona's literature demonstrates its

intimate audience, and how Iona's monks built their identity and thought out of their ocean surroundings. It was in their local seascape that they embodied the example of Christ. Island geography was common to a list of other famous monasteries. The late antique island community on Lérins was structured around many of the same religious ideals sought out by Iona's monks. Its reliance on outside resources was a close parallel with the economic experience of Iona. The Irish phenomenon of island monasticism was characterised by foundations that were dependencies: extensions of large monastic houses or serving mainland noble families. Iona flipped the typical economic pyramid of Irish island monasticism. Iona was the mother house, and the head of a large monastic *familia* that made it distinct among Scottish parallels. English examples of island monasticism showed that foundations could recreate the spiritual and physical ideals of insularity without the challenges that came with island life. Iona on the other hand embraced its isolation; it had an immediate relationship with the ocean, and the community developed a distinct economic model that sustained this challenging existence.

Four ideas can be distilled from the preceding chapters that change our historical understanding of early medieval Iona: all stemming from the monastery's relationship with the ocean. First, the ocean challenged the sustainability of Iona, but the ocean was also the means of overcoming the hardships it helped produce. Second, the connective power of the ocean was significant for the monastery's maintenance, its social network, and its political aims, but the ocean should primarily be seen as a local force of connectivity. Third, while Ionan authors drew on many traditions to understand their ocean environment, it was in the immediate and lived-in seascape of the monastery that those influences crystalised into the distinct viewpoint that the monks had. Finally, the monastery developed an economic

programme that responded to the challenges of ocean-insularity Iona sought to overcome.

Historiographical Connections

Fernand Braudel characterised Mediterranean islands as 'lands of hunger'.[1] Pre-modern life was dominated by the challenges of subsistence, something closely linked to the climate, and this fragile human existence makes the interaction between humanity and the environment valuable for historical consideration. Some low-level endemic famine is something that Caroline Wickham-Jones has suggested for Scotland throughout prehistory based on shellfish evidence like that found on Iona.[2] The example of Iona shows that food scarcity and climate vulnerability were endemic to medieval agricultural societies and that it could cut across social and economic hierarchies. While its effects were certainly maximised at the bottom of the socio-economic spectrum, the direct and knock-on effects of weather events and agricultural downturns impacted even those at the very top of society, significantly shaping their actions.[3] This, I might accept, pessimistic outlook was always at the back of my mind during this thesis. It is reminiscent of the view taken by Emmanuel

[1] Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, i, p. 152. The vision of island insularity that comes with Braudel's description, while popular, has come under criticism by proponents of 'Island Theory' and island archaeologists who attack the Darwinian and western anthropological background to the assumptions he made: Arie Boomert and Alistair J. Bright, 'Island Archaeology: In Search of a New Horizon', *Island Studies Journal*, 2:1 (2007), pp. 3-18; Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6:1 (1994), pp. 148-61; Paul Rainbird, 'Islands Out of Time: Towards a Critique of Island Archaeology', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 12:2 (1999), pp. 216-32; Scott M. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Voyages of Discovery: the archaeology of Islands* (Westport CT, 2004). Some of these critical ideas have been used by scholars of Iona and Ireland: Alfred Hiatt, 'From Pliny to Brexit: Spatial Representation of the British Isles', *Postmedieval*, 7:4 (2016), pp. 514-518; David Petts, '"Through All the Provinces of the Islands of Ocean": Iona and Coastal Monasticism in Early Medieval Britain', in Evemalm-Graham, with Clancy and Márkus (eds.), *Ì Chaluim Chille*, pp. 44-9; James L. Smith, 'Brendan Meets Columbus: A More Commodious Islescape', *Postmedieval*, 7:4 (2016), pp. 530-537.
[2] Caroline Wickham-Jones, 'Middens in Scottish Prehistory: Time, Space and Relativity', in Nicky Milner, Oliver E. Craig, and G.N. Bailey (eds.), *Shell Middens in Atlantic Europe* (Oxford, 2007), p. 91.
[3] See the discussion above, Chapter One, pp. 70-4.

Le Roy Ladurie,[4] and it sits in contrast to the influential thesis of Lynn White, and his vision of medieval environmental exploitation.[5] The early medieval relationship with the natural world, seen through history of Iona, did not reflect humanity's control over the environment, or even the *belief* in human's control over it. Instead, one can see the embodied reality of powerlessness in the face of creation: a reality that matched the postlapsarian human condition, rather than the prelapsarian Edenic ideal.[6] Although the ocean environment created the fragile sustainability of Iona, by negotiating with the power of the ocean, the monks could connect themselves to the farms and farmers that maintained the monastery's food supply. There exists a middle ground between seeing medieval people as exploiters of their environment or as 'sleepwalkers' – controlled entirely by the shape and force of their geography.[7] The Ionan monks adapted technologically and socially to overcome the obstacles that came with insularity and their ocean surroundings. Spiritually, they appealed to the divine and to their holy patron saint Columba to overcome the absence of control they felt over creation.

The conclusions of my first chapter have some similarities to the arguments put forward by Horden and Purcell in *The Corrupting Sea*. They argued that the Mediterranean created micro-ecologies around its shore that necessitated interaction and connectivity between any community to survive and thrive. Such connectivity through sea-lanes was an obvious way of overcoming marginal environments, like islands, and solving challenges to agricultural productivity.[8] While those authors

[4] Le Roy Ladurie, *Times of Feast, Times of Famine*, p. 23.
[5] White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', pp. 1203-7.
[6] The common human condition of this struggle with the natural world is something explored anthropologically by Marshall Sahlins with contributions from Frederick B. Henry Jr., *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe* (Princeton NJ, 2022), pp. 16-33, 174-6.
[7] Devroey, *La Nature et le Roi*, p. 432.
[8] Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, pp. 176-81, 224-30.

were more relaxed about the seasonal or practical challenges that communities faced in plugging into this network of micro-ecologies, I agree more with other Mediterranean and Atlantic seaway scholars like Abulafia, Braudel, and Wooding in emphasising the dangers of sea travel, its inconsistency, the expertise needed in making journeys, and the caution taken by pre-modern sailors.[9] In monographs focused on the ocean, Barry Cunliffe has stressed the connective and communicative power of the Atlantic – that bordering a body of water called for exploration and mobility – but he balanced this by appreciating the obvious threat and challenges posed by the ocean, especially in comparison with the Mediterranean.[10] I would also argue that the connective power of the ocean was maximised for the local environment, not the regional or global examples seen in some Ionan sources. Put another way, I would agree with Barry Cunliffe in his discussion of Bronze Age trade: the evidence shows that most ocean traffic occurred in local zones of sea-movement from northern Britain to southern Spain, but I would emphasise those zones of connection (perhaps even smaller ones than those that appear in his maps) rather than any cultural, economic, or social unity felt by the communities bordering the Atlantic.[11]

Scholars who have explored the connective potential of the sea and other waterways have overwhelmingly taken maximalist positions.[12] In these studies the ocean's ability to facilitate mobility, trade, and movement, have been extended to largest possible range. The example of Iona shows that the sea's usefulness at these

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[9] Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, pp. 182, 202-3, 312-14, 648; Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, i, pp. 246-58; David Abulafia, 'Islands in Context, A.D. 400-1000', in Miguel Ángel Cau Ontiveros and Catalina Mas Florit (eds.), *Change and Resilience: The Occupation of Mediterranean Islands in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 291-2, 295; Wooding, *Communication and Commerce*, pp. 16-21. *Cf*. Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, pp. 133-43; Horden, 'Afterword', p. 566.
[10] Cunliffe, *Europe Between the Oceans*, pp. 26-9, 475-9; *id*., *Facing the Ocean*, pp. 1-10, 554-67; *id*., *On the Ocean*, pp. 37-73.
[11] Cunliffe, *Facing the Ocean*, pp. 286-7.
[12] See above, Introduction, pp. 21-2

levels could be intermittent. By stressing that it was the local power of seaways that deserves more historical attention, I hope to push back against the current historiographical dominance of global histories. I am not alone: recentring the local, contingent, and fragile subsistence lives of Iona's ocean-monks against the pull of the global is not without parallels. Other scholars have similarly adapted and disputed elements of global history: 'world systems' scholars have included peripheries that interact tangentially within their larger networks;[13] pre-modern models have been criticised as not truly global, and have been taken up by others as examples of a different kind of large-scale network;[14] and scholars have integrated micro-historical scales to compensate for the lack of intimacy global histories have.[15] Away from just theory, Søren Michael Sindbæk has argued through the example of the Vikings that the scale of early medieval communication and exchange could be termed global, but it was also exclusive to a small number of people, linked by a small number of hubs, and was fragile to disruption: leading to only moments of global connectivity.[16] Mischa Meier and Steffen Patzold have recently asked historians to take seriously the real communication 'ruptures' that could occur in the medieval world.[17] Taking on preconceptions about the Silk Road, Valerie Hansen has stressed the dominance of local trade between changing markets along the route, not the long-distance networks. For the people who lived subsistence lives along these

[13] Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, i, pp. 301-44.
[14] De Vries, 'The Limits of Globalization', pp. 710-11; Purcell, 'Unnecessary Dependencies', pp. 66-79.
[15] Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman, 'Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity', *History and Theory*, 45 (2006), pp. 42-4; Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World', *History and Theory*, 50 (2011), pp. 190-2.
[16] Søren Michael Sindbæk, 'The Small World of the Vikings: Networks in Early Medieval Communication and Exchange', *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 40:1 (2007), pp. 70-1.
[17] Mischa Meier and Steffen Patzold, 'Qualifying Mediterranean Connectivity: Byzantium and the Franks During the Seventh Century', *Early Medieval Europe*, 31:3 (2023), pp. 380-404, esp. 384, 404.

Silk Roads, they saw these routeways as primarily local: to them this was the most meaningful level of connectivity.[18]

By emphasising the local role the ocean played for the Ionan community, it would stand to reason that this thesis would also argue that the particularity of Iona's environment, both cultural and natural, would lead it to develop a distinctive and local conception of the ocean. This is the argument of the third chapter of the thesis, but I am keen to stress that this particularity was not divorced from the undercurrents of classical, biblical, late antique, and Irish thought that contributed to the community's view of the sea, and its role in their imaginative and theological lives. This position stands in relation to the thought of Peter Brown. He has argued for fragmentary micro-Christendoms, each an assimilation of indigenous belief into a universal religion, that led to the successful spread of Christianity throughout Europe.[19] In his discussion of both Iona and Ireland, Brown has argued that a distinct form of Christian culture had formed among the Celtic speakers of the British Isles connected both to the desert fathers, and also to pre-Christian religion.[20] The third chapter of this thesis argues that the ocean was an environment for Iona's monks to play out Christo-mimesis based on a merging of late antique theology with Irish legal culture.[21] While pre-Christian religion may have played a role in Iona's theological and cultural understanding of the ocean, it was not as significant. Here my conception of Iona's localised belief departs from Brown, but this may be because Brown was not precise enough on what the characteristics of Ireland's micro-Christianity were. Adomnán was described by Brown as steeped in scholarly knowledge and part of a Christendom-wide network of thinkers sharing similar

[18] Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 196-7.
[19] Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, pp. 14-17.
[20] *Ibid*., pp. 239-46, 327-30, 335-9
[21] See above, Chapter Three, pp. 191-4.

anxieties about their faith. Columbanus, though portrayed as having a dearth of books to work with, could expect to live, as he did, sharing in the same cultural world as those in continental Europe: under one 'Latin sky'.[22] Likewise Iona was deeply embedded in this wider Christian tradition. There always seems to be more shared between the micro-Christendoms than anything distinct, and those things that were labelled as distinct by Brown often followed similar patterns.[23]

My thesis then argues two seemingly conflicting models: one, that the ocean was a largely isolating force, impacting the sustainability of the monastery and giving Iona a distinct relationship to its environment; and second, that the monks of Iona had an understanding of their ocean surroundings that was influenced and mediated by biblical, patristic, and Irish thought, but not reflecting some divergent form of Christianity. More precisely, my third chapter focuses on the attention paid to the ocean shown in the Ionan poetry and literature, arguing that it reflected the importance of the ultra-local environment to the monks in how they practised their faith, and that the audience of these writings was primarily the Columban community who shared this closeness to the sea. My response to Brown's micro-Christendom thesis is to argue at a level of analysis that is even more micro. One parallel example can be given: I think it is telling that Thomas O'Loughlin did not offer a systematic *Celtic Theology* in a book so titled. He was correct to avoid this because the theology of the 'Celts' survived in such a diversity of forms that any systematic view would not be accurate to the range of thought exhibited in the

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[22] Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, pp. 239-47, 329-30.

[23] Take for example the description of monsters and the 'otherworld' being differentiated between Ireland and England (Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, pp. 483-6). The 'otherworld' forces of Ireland could be just as substantial and present as those in England (see for instance Cormac's encounter with sea monsters, *VC*, §ii.42). Much like how Grendel and his mother were given genealogical links to the Cain of the Old Testament, one of the conversion strategies of early Christian Ireland was to give heroic figures pedigrees that stretched into the biblical past: Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 196-202.

sources.[24] Conor O'Brien has similarly argued that the political-theological thought of Irish exegesis is best understood by considering the local and regional contexts from which it sprang: it being 'both more and less than simply Irish'.[25] The Ionan understanding of the ocean developed in the traditions of both the continental and Irish traditions of thought, but it is best understood by drilling down to the immediate environmental context shared by the community.

Ellen Arnold has taken a similar approach in her work on the dual monastery of Stavelot-Malmedy in the early medieval Ardennes. It was that local environment of the Ardennes that defined the culture and economic opportunities of the monastic community.[26] The natural surroundings of the religious houses were both a desert wilderness to the monks and the managed landscape of agriculture: two seemingly contradictory ways of seeing the local world, but both were important to how the monks understood themselves and the environment.[27] That the Ardennes could be such a desert-wilderness of contradictions is something discussed in an influential paper by Jacques Le Goff (someone Arnold was reacting to in her analysis of Stavelot-Malmedy).[28] While Le Goff viewed the boundary between wilderness and the world as something hard, shown as such in religious texts, Arnold preferred to blur that boundary and showed how monastic authors did the same.[29] Importantly, monastic writing could also have a 'verisimilitude effect': often medieval narrative

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[24] Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London, 2000), pp. 203-4. If, that is, Celtic theology and a Celtic Church themselves can be called 'valid concepts': Kathleen Hughes, 'The Celtic Church: Is This a Valid Concept?', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 1 (1981), pp. 1-15; Wendy Davies, 'The Myth of the Celtic Church', in Nancy Edwards and Alan Lane (eds.), *The Early Church in Wales and the West: Recent Work in Early Christian Archaeology, History and Place-Names* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 12-21.
[25] Conor O'Brien, 'Political Thought in Early Irish Exegesis', *Peritia*, 32 (2021), p. 212.
[26] Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, p. 7.
[27] *Ibid*., pp. 36-56, 100-9.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 26; Jacques Le Goff, 'The Wilderness in the Medieval West', in *id*., *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago IL, 1988), pp. 47-59.
[29] Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, pp. 214-18.

texts reflect the real relationships the community had with natural and social worlds around them.[30] This could of course be a constructed, imagined, or an ideal relationship with those worlds, revealing the potential aims of a community and even the battles fought to define and control the landscape.[31] Arnold concluded her work by arguing that each monastic house could have a deep and unique story about its connection to its local landscape and environment.[32] For Iona, it was the Hebridean seascape that dominated that story, and created the monastery's characteristic way of seeing the ocean and the wider world.

While this is true, the fourth chapter of this thesis does suggest that there were commonalities shared between island monasteries. The key shared trait was their necessary dependence on the mainland for their foundation, sustainability, and growth. The texts and archaeology produced by these monasteries show that this economic and social relationship with the mainland could manifest itself in singular ways. Arnold's demonstration that Stavelot-Malmedy's literature was concerned with its environment because of the economic relationship it had with that surrounding landscape may be relevant here. The ocean was the main vehicle by which Iona managed and interacted economically with its estates. Smaller island monasteries, or those passive economically, did not use the sea as a daily tool to the same degree as Iona's monks, and consequently the ocean or sea became only a marginal part of their environmental thought and writing, if mentioned at all.[33] In contrast, the ocean became centralised in the environmental thought of Iona because its socio-economic situation mandated its frequent use, which, as is shown in the above chapters, sprung

[30] Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, p. 13; Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, *Writing Faith: Text, Sign, and History in the Miracles of Sainte Foy* (Chicago IL, 1999), p. 29.
[31] Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, pp. 146-50, 178-203.
[32] *Ibid*., p. 211.
[33] See above, Chapter Four.

from the ocean's climatic effects. However, the ideal of insularity did not require a monastery to be founded on an island like Iona. This separates Iona from some of Arnold's ideas. In her discussion of Stavelot-Malmedy's self-perception as a desert-wilderness, she pointed out that the houses were placed in areas with a long history of medieval settlement.[34] Stavelot-Malmedy's rhetoric of desert solitude should then be understood primarily for its symbolic meaning: while some dangers still existed in their wilderness, their descriptions were used more to interpret the cultivated landscape that really existed. The fact that Iona was really isolated, while also producing a wealth of thought devoted to its ocean environment, leads into the overall conclusions of this thesis.

## The Celestial Harbour

The viewpoint guiding this thesis is that the ocean was the most important factor that shaped the history and achievements of early medieval Iona. At every level of the medieval island and community's reality, ecological, social, imaginative, and economic, the ocean had a significant role in shaping the identity and lives of the Ionan monks. More than this, the conclusions of my individual chapters challenge historians to rethink some of the current understandings about Iona. Rather than a monastery 'living off the fat of the land', I have argued that the impact of the ocean climate and ocean surroundings created profound challenges to Iona's sustainability.[35] Rather than an island community that was part of a dense and well-trafficked network of potentially global sea-lanes, I have argued that the ocean should be seen as much as an isolating force as it was a driver of connectivity. By

[34] Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, pp. 23-4.
[35] Doherty, 'Hagiography as a Source for Irish Economic History', p. 301.

taking apart the potential cultural and intellectual influences on Iona's understanding of the ocean, I have suggested that the local ocean environment the monks lived in should be seen as a primary influence. Finally, I have shown that while Iona was within a tradition of island monasticism and shared many characteristics with other island monasteries, in contrast, the Columban mother house was economically proactive while remaining isolated and challenged by its natural environment.

To argue, as this thesis has overall, that Iona needs to be recontextualised as potentially isolated and challenged by its environment will be somewhat contentious. It has often been repeated that any sense that Iona was in a marginal location is a misleading modern idea, because seaways made the location highly connected and gave the community easy access to both Britain and Ireland.[36] This thesis would agree somewhat with this view: while the ocean could be a force of physical isolation, it was a powerful means to connect Iona to its local environment and surrounding communities, allowing the monastery to overcome its potentially marginal environment. That the physical isolation of Iona is solely a modern perception however, I would disagree with.[37] Chapter Two and Four of this thesis argue that the monks of Iona saw themselves as geographically isolated, and, unlike comparable insular monasteries, this was not rhetoric. The key argument of Chapter Three was that Columba's ocean exile became equated with a form of self-accepted crucifixion. The distance and struggle that came with life on Iona was the point.

All these arguments are based principally on sources and evidence from after Columba's death, and yet the saint remains so key to any of their interpretations.

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[36] Historic Environment Scotland, 'Iona Abbey and Nunnery', https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/iona-abbey-and-nunnery/history/ (12 May 2025).

[37] I agree with T.M. Charles-Edwards to some extent that Iona was one of the most marginal places one could imagine in the Irish world, if still strategically situated in an insular context: *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 298; *id*., 'Iona and the Sea', pp. 4-5.

Columba was, in the minds of Iona's monks, ever present in that local ocean landscape long after he had departed corporeally from it. By acting out Columba's life in the landscape of Iona, a monk could live both in his image and in the image of Christ. The radicalism of Columba's ocean exile, and the cultural beliefs that underwrote it, crystalised the religious meaning that the Columban community gained from their isolated lives on Iona. Even if the geography of Iona was isolating, and challenged the sustainability of the monastery, the charismatic acts of Columba imbued that local geography with meaning and a magnetism. This was sufficient that current and potential monks could understand the value that came with following Columba's example and his form of monastic life. To live out the life of Columba, and thus of Christ, in the oceanicity of Iona's landscape produced a gravity that pulled his successors towards the island. This meant that they would overcome or circumnavigate the challenges that came with the island, rather than relocate or recontextualise his cult.

In his record of the debate at Whitby, Bede emphasised the importance of Columba's person and his traditions to the Ionan faction.[38] When holding to those traditions and way of life became untenable, Colmán and his followers sought out another island to live in the image of their guiding saint. Of course, this is Bede's account of Colmán's reasoning, and it fitted with the message and themes the author wanted to convey in his *Ecclesiastical History*. However, Adomnán also expressed his belief that the plague scoured the regions of Britain and Ireland because they had abandoned Columba's practices and authority, while Dál Riata and Pictland had been spared.[39] The institutional memory and culture of Ionan monasticism, orbiting the

[38] *HE*, §§iii.25-6, iv.4.
[39] *VC*, §ii.46.

story and example of Columba, seems to have been key in holding the community of Columban monks together. So much so, that when Adomnán potentially tried to redefine those memories of Columba and the institutional framework of the monastic community, he may have run afoul of his own monks' 'natural conservatism'.[40]

Yet perhaps this is focusing too much on the socio-cultural layer of meaning that the Columban *familia* saw in the ocean and their environment. As the other three chapters have emphasised, the ocean was a key determinant of the island's climate, and it was how Iona's monks overcame the sustainability challenges the ocean created. Ocean networks connected Iona to their local environment and crucially, their dependent monasteries, estates, and local farms, in a way that allowed them to become a thriving monastic community. Their socio-economic model stemmed from the landscape realities created by the ocean. Reflecting on the work of Ellen Arnold just above, I argue that the ocean gained meaning in the religious thought and literature of Iona because it played such a crucial role in the economic programme of the monastery. This socio-economic interaction with the environment cemented the importance of the local surroundings of the island to the identity of the Columban *familia*. The result was not only an attachment to that particular geography in which Columba had lived, but also an attachment to the cultural and religious meaning that saturated the socio-economic model that grew out of the Ionan seascape. This thesis and its view of Iona could be seen through the lens of *l'histoire immobile*. Neatly, this 'immobile history' compliments the global historian's focus on the power of mobility.[41] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie argued that the communities of the Languedoc remained unchanging for centuries because their culture, their geography,

[40] Stancliffe, '"Charity with Peace"', pp. 60-1.
[41] Belich, Darwin, and Wickham, 'Introduction', pp. 14-15.

and their economy combined to stop any alteration or growth.[42] Thus the community of Iona, holding to the example of Columba, his ocean asceticism, and the cultural values that grew out of his sanctity, also held firm to an agriculturally marginal island monastery, a local ocean landscape, and an economic model built around it.

This socio-economic structure was, however, rigid and fragile to exogenous effects. Some 'small-world' networks, defined by a few key hubs, were liable to break entirely if a single node was taken out.[43] Looking at the ocean networks of the Columban *familia* presented in the second chapter, the key hub was the island of Iona itself, with no other obvious rival. Iona unified the Columban *familia*. If it was cut out, the entire structure might fail. The arrival of the Vikings shook that fragile superstructure:

> AD 794: All the islands of Britain were ravaged by the heathens.[44]
>
> AD 802: Iona was burned by the heathens.[45]
>
> AD 806: Sixty-eight members of the community of Iona were killed by the heathens.[46]
>
> AD 825: The martyrdom of Blathmac son of Flann by the heathens on Iona.[47]

In response, the community of Columba was forced to change. A period in the history of the Columban *familia* had ended: one that started with ocean, as Columba set sail, and closed with ocean, as Viking raiders arrived on the island's shores. Yet the island and its local geography would retain the meaning Columba and his

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[42] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, 'L'Histoire Immobile', *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilizations*, 29:3 (1974), pp. 688-92; *id*., *The Peasants of Languedoc*, trans. John Day (Chicago IL, 1974), pp. 296-302.
[43] Sindbæk, 'The Small World of the Vikings', pp. 61-2, 70-1.
[44] *AU*, §794.7: *Vastatio omnium insularum Britannie a gentilibus*.
[45] *AU*, §802.9: *I Columbe Cille a gentibus combusta est*.
[46] *AU*, §806.9: *Familia Iae occisa est a gentilibus, id est .lxviii*.
[47] *AU*, §825.17: *Martre Blaimhicc m. Flainn o genntib i nh-I Coluim Cille*.

successors imbued it with, and still today it is sought out by those who feel 'that solemn scenes of piety never lose their sanctity'.[48]

The ocean dictates life on Iona to this day, it always will. How the monks of early medieval Iona overcame the challenges their environment created, and achieved what they did, is more impressive to me than for them to be masters of their ocean surroundings. The image that started my interest in medieval Iona was one of their monks 'rowing through the storm' seen in the poem *Adiutor Laborantium*.[49] Over the course of this thesis, I have stressed how the Columban community built an institution that used the ocean as much as was impacted by it. To see the monks as solely struggling to exist in a harsh climate and geography is wrong. So much of their existence was finding immense meaning in the struggle; meaning that also stemmed from the mechanics of using the ocean to make the monastery successful. Iona would never be a home without challenges, but its monks built a monastery that succeeded in the midst of the ocean, and that allowed their community to live in the image of Columba: rowing towards the heavenly goal of the 'celestial harbour'.[50] The poem, and Iona's relationship with the ocean, can only be understood if both images are kept in mind.

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[48] James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 370-1. In the Viking period, the island and the monastic community of Iona would continue to play an important role in the insular world, if substantially changed: Adrián Maldonado, Ewan Campbell, and Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Iona in the Viking Age: Laying a "Zombie Narrative" to Rest', *Current Archaeology*, 381 (Dec. 2021), pp. 18-25; Andrew Jennings, 'Iona and the Vikings: Survival and Continuity', *Northern Studies*, 33 (1998), pp. 37-54; Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Iona V. Kells: Succession, Jurisdiction and Politics in the Columban *Familia* in the Later Tenth Century', in Edmunds and Russell (eds.), *Tome*, pp. 89-101.

[49] *Adiutor Laborantium*, ll. 18-19

[50] *Ibid*., ll. 20-21: *supernum* […] *portum*.

## APPENDIX – JOURNEYS IN THE *LIFE OF COLUMBA*

Journeys in this table are defined as the movement of people from an origin to a terminus, even if those places are not explicitly stated. For example, St Fintan was sent from Iona to Leinster to found his monastery at Taghmon, Co. Wexford (§i.2). These locations are made explicit, and the journey is recorded in the below table as Origin: Iona, Terminus: Taghmon, Co. Wexford. In some stories that describe Columba sailing, neither origin nor destination are mentioned. These journeys are still recorded in the below table (§§ii.12-13), but only named origins and termini appear in the maps found above. In some cases, this means only a journey's terminus will appear on a map (§i.16). When no discrete journey is mentioned, such as when Columba 'stayed for some months in the midland region of Ireland' and founded Durrow (§i.3), no journey from Iona to Ireland appears in the table, nor one from the midlands to Durrow. However, in this same chapter the reader is told that Columba then travelled to Clonmacnoise (§i.3), so a journey does appear from Origin: Durrow?, to Terminus: Clonmacnoise. Where the locations of certain origins and termini are hypothesised, or are assumed from the context of the story, a question-mark appears to signal this (e.g. Durrow? above §i.3, and Dunadd? §§pref.2/i.7). Three question-marks (???) signal that no location can be deduced.

| Origin | Terminus | Traveller(s) | Region | §§ | Ocean-Going? | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ireland | Dunadd? | St Columba, and his twelve companions | Insular | pref.2 / i.7 | Yes | See above, Introduction, p. 7, n. 28. |
| Northumbria? | Iona? | King Oswald of Northumbria | Insular | i.3 | Yes | See above, Chapter Two, pp. 119-20, n. 197. |
| Iona? | Derry | Two Ionan monks | Insular | i.2 | Yes | |
| Derry | near Derry | Two Ionan monks | Ireland | i.2 | No | See above, Chapter Two, pp. 110-11. |
| near Derry | Iona | St Fintan mac Tulcháin | Insular | i.2 | Yes | |
| Iona | Taghmon, Co. Wexford | St Fintan mac Tulcháin | Insular | i.2 | Yes | |
| Durrow | Clonmacnoise | St Columba | Ireland | i.3 | No | |
| Aghaboe, Co. Laois? | Iona | St Cainnech | Insular | i.4 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 68. |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lynally,<br>Co. Offaly? | Rathlin Island,<br>Co. Antrim | Bishop Colmán moccu Sailni | Insular | i.5 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 70. |
| Rathlin Island,<br>Co. Antrim | Iona | Bishop Colmán moccu Sailni | Dál Riata | i.5 | Yes | |
| Erris,<br>Co. Mayo | the Ocean | Cormac Ua Liatháin | Global | i.6 | Yes | |
| Ardnamurchan? | Kentra Bay,<br>Ardnamurchan? | St Columba | Dál Riata | i.12 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 93. |
| Ireland | Kentra Bay,<br>Ardnamurchan? | Sailors | Insular | i.12 | Yes | |
| Granard,<br>Co. Longford? | Iona? | Óengus mac Áedo Commain,<br>and his two brothers | Insular | i.13 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 94. |
| Dumbarton | Iona? | Luigbe moccu Min | Insular | i.15 | Yes | |
| ??? | Iona | Two laymen,<br>Meldán and Glasderc | ??? | i.16 | Yes | |
| Iona | Connacht? | Colgu mac Áedo Draigniche | Insular | i.17 | Yes | Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 39, 52. |
| Connacht? | Iona | Colgu mac Áedo Draigniche | Insular | i.17 | Yes | |
| Iona | near Derry | Trénán | Insular | i.18 | Yes | See above, Chapter Two, pp. 110-11. |
| near Derry | Ireland | Trénán and Lasrén moccu Moie | Ireland | i.18 | No | |
| Ireland | Iona | Trénán and Lasrén moccu Moie | Insular | i.18 | Yes | |
| Iona | Tiree | Berach | Dál Riata | i.19 | Yes | |
| Iona | Tiree | Baithéne | Dál Riata | i.19 | Yes | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ireland? | Iona? | Báetán | Insular | i.20 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, nn. 108, 110. |
| Iona? | the Ocean | Báetán | Global | i.20 | Yes | |
| the Ocean | Culdaff, Co. Donegal? | Báetán | Insular | i.20 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 110. |
| Culdaff, Co. Donegal? | Derry | Báetán | Ireland | i.20 | No | *Cf.* Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 111. |
| ??? | Hinba | St Columba | ??? | i.21 | Yes | On Hinba, see above, Chapter Four, p. 228, n. 165. |
| West of Lough Neagh? | Iona | Lugaid, and a sinner of the Uí Thuirtri | Insular | i.22 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 123. |
| Iona | Castledawson, Co. Londonderry | A sinner of the Uí Thuirtri | Insular | i.22 | Yes | *Ibid.* |
| Mull | Iona | A clumsy guest | Dál Riata | i.25 | Yes | |
| Mull | Iona | Áedán mac Fergnai | Dál Riata | i.26 | Yes | |
| Mull | Iona | A sick man | Dál Riata | i.27 | Yes | |
| Iona? | Dunadd? | St Columba and Luigbe moccu Min | Dál Riata | i.28 | Yes | See above, Chapter Two, pp. 100 n. 92, 123. |
| Gaul | Dunadd? | Gallic sailors | Global | i.28 | Yes | |
| Ireland | Iona | Fiachnae the scholar | Insular | i.30 | Yes | |
| Iona | Tiree | Fiachnae the scholar | Dál Riata | i.30 | Yes | |
| Iona | Church of Diún, near the River Awe | Two Ionan monks | Dál Riata | i.31 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 143; see also above, Chapter Two, p. 106. |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Church of Diún, near the River Awe | Iona | Cailtan, and the two Ionan monks | Dál Riata | i.31 | Yes | |
| ??? | Mull | Two pilgrim brothers | ??? | i.32 | Yes | |
| Mull | Iona | Two pilgrim brothers | Dál Riata | i.32 | Yes | |
| Cé, Aberdeenshire? | Skye | Artbranan | Pictland | i.33 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 149. |
| Iona? | Loch Lochy | St Columba | Dál Riata | i.34 | Yes | |
| Iona | Co. Antrim? | Colgu mac Cellaig | Insular | i.35 | Yes | Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, n. 75; see also above, Chapter Two, p. 112, n. 145. |
| Co. Antrim? | Tiree | Findchán and Áed Dub | Insular | i.36 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 158. |
| Brega? | Trevet, Co. Meath | St Columba | Ireland | i.40 | No | See *VC*, §i.28. |
| Iona | Mull | Luigbe and Silnán | Dál Riata | i.41 | Yes | |
| Coll | Mull | Erc moccu Druidi | Dál Riata | i.41 | Yes | |
| Mull | Iona | Erc moccu Druidi, with Luigbe and Silnán | Dál Riata | i.41 | Yes | |
| Iona | Coll | Erc moccu Druidi | Dál Riata | i.41 | Yes | |
| Iona | Tiree | Messengers | Dál Riata | i.41 | Yes | |
| Tiree | Coll | Ionan monks with gifts | Dál Riata | i.41 | Yes | |
| Ireland | Mull | Traveller | Insular | i.43 | Yes | |
| Mull | Iona | Traveller | Dál Riata | i.43 | Yes | |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Munster | Iona? | Bishop Crónán | Insular | i.44 | Yes | |
| Iona | Hinba | Ermán, uncle of Columba | Dál Riata | i.45 | Yes | |
| Hinba | Iona | Ermán, uncle of Columba | Dál Riata | i.45 | Yes | |
| Morvern? | Loch Rannoch? | Layman | Dál Riata? | i.46 | Yes | Watson, *Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, p. 94. |
| Loch Rannoch? | Morvern? | Layman | Dál Riata? | i.46 | Yes | Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, n. 109. |
| Druim Cett | Dún Cethirn | St Columba and St Comgall | Ireland | i.49 | No | |
| Camus, Co. Londonderry | Dún Cethirn | Fínán | Ireland | i.49 | No | |
| Dún Cethirn | Camus, Co. Londonderry | Fínán | Ireland | i.49 | No | |
| Dún Cethirn | Coleraine, Co. Londonderry | St Columba | Ireland | i.50 | No | |
| Iona | Mull? | Ionan monks | Dál Riata | ii.3 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 214. |
| Mull? | Iona | Ionan monks | Dál Riata | ii.3 | Yes | |
| Iona | Mull? | Ionan monks | Dál Riata | ii.3 | Yes | |
| Iona | near Dublin | Silnán mac Nemaidon | Insular | ii.4 | Yes | |
| Iona | Clogher, Co. Tyrone | Lugaid Láitir | Insular | ii.5 | Yes | |
| ??? | Ardnamurchan | St Columba | Dál Riata | ii.10 | No | |
| ??? | ??? | St Columba | ??? | ii.12 | Yes | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ??? | ??? | St Columba | ??? | ii.13 | Yes | |
| Iona | Islay | St Cainnech | Dál Riata | ii.14 | Yes | |
| Islay | Ireland | St Cainnech | Insular | ii. 14 | Yes | |
| Iona | Tiree | Baithéne | Dál Riata | ii.15 | Yes | |
| Iona | Ireland | Colmán mac Beogna | Insular | ii.15 | Yes | |
| ??? | ??? (Cainle) | Two country people | ??? | ii.17 | No | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, nn. 174, 247. |
| ??? | Lochaber? | St Columba | Dál Riata | ii.20 | Yes | Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, n. 148. |
| ??? | Sanna Bay, Ardnamurchan? | St Columba | Dál Riata | ii.21 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 260. |
| Kintyre? | Sanna Bay, Ardnamurchan? | Ioan mac Conaill macDomnaill | Dál Riata | ii.22 | Yes | |
| Kintyre? | Sanna Bay, Ardnamurchan? | Ioan mac Conaill macDomnaill | Dál Riata | ii.22 | Yes | |
| Kintyre? | Sanna Bay, Ardnamurchan? | Ioan mac Conaill macDomnaill | Dál Riata | ii.22 | Yes | |
| Ardnamurchan? | Sanna Bay, Ardnamurchan? | St Columba | Dál Riata | ii.22 | Yes | |
| Sanna Bay, Ardnamurchan? | Between Mull and Coll | Ioan mac Conaill macDomnaill | Dál Riata | ii.22 | Yes | |
| Pictland? | Iona? | Feradach | Insular | ii.23 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 261. |
| Iona? | Islay | Feradach | Dál Riata | ii.23 | Yes | |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dál Riata? | Iona? | Travellers | Dál Riata | ii.23 | Yes | |
| Craig Phadrig | River Ness | St Columba | Pictland | ii.33 | No | |
| Craig Phadrig | River Ness | Two messengers of Bridei | Pictland | ii.33 | No | |
| River Ness | Iona | St Columba | Insular | ii.34 | Yes | |
| ??? | Craig Phadrig | St Columba | ??? | ii.35 | Yes | |
| Ireland | Terryglass,<br>Co. Tipperary | St Columba | Ireland | ii.36 | No | |
| Iona | Ireland | Lugaid Láitir | Insular | ii.38 | Yes | |
| Connacht | Iona | Librán | Insular | ii.39 | Yes | |
| Iona | Tiree | Librán | Dál Riata | ii.39 | Yes | |
| Tiree | Iona | Librán | Dál Riata | ii.39 | Yes | |
| Iona | Connacht | Librán | Insular | ii.39 | Yes | |
| Connacht | Derry | Librán | Ireland | ii.39 | No | |
| Derry | Britain | Librán,<br>and sailors to Britain | Insular | ii.39 | Yes | |
| Britain | Iona | Librán | Dál Riata | ii.39 | Yes | |
| Iona | Tiree | Librán | Dál Riata | ii.39 | Yes | |
| Tiree | Brega | Librán | Insular | ii.39 | Yes | |
| Brega | Durrow | Librán | Ireland | ii.39 | No | |
| Ireland | Iona | Messengers | Insular | ii.40 | Yes | |
| Iona? | the Ocean | Cormac Ua Liatháin | Global | ii.42 | Yes | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| the Ocean | Orkney | Cormac Ua Liatháin | Global | ii.42 | Yes | |
| Orkney | Iona | Cormac Ua Liatháin | Insular | ii.42 | Yes | |
| Iona | the Ocean | Cormac Ua Liatháin | Global | ii.42 | Yes | |
| the Ocean | Iona | Cormac Ua Liatháin | Global | ii.42 | Yes | |
| ??? | ??? | Columba and Colmán mac Echdach | Ireland | ii.43 | No | |
| Iona | River Shiel? | Ionan monks | Dál Riata | ii.45 | Yes | See above, Chapter Two, p. 103, n. 102. |
| River Shiel? | Iona | Ionan monks | Dál Riata | ii.45 | Yes | |
| Iona | River Shiel? | Adomnán, and Ionan monks | Dál Riata | ii.45 | Yes | |
| River Shiel? | Eilean Shona? | Adomnán, and Ionan monks | Dál Riata | ii.45 | Yes | |
| Eilean Shona? | Iona | Adomnán, and Ionan monks | Dál Riata | ii.45 | Yes | |
| Birr? | Island of Saine? | Adomnán | Insular | ii.45 | Yes | Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, pp. 111-12; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, nn. 341, 343; see also above Chapter Two, pp. 106-7, n. 120. |
| Island of Saine? | Iona | Adomnán | Dál Riata | ii.45 | Yes | |
| Iona? | Northumbria | Adomnán | Insular | ii.46 | Yes | See above, Chapter Two, p. 120, n. 194. |
| Iona? | Northumbria | Adomnán | Insular | ii.46 | Yes | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ??? | Teltown, Co. Meath | St Columba | Ireland | iii.3 | No | |
| Birr? | Teltown, Co. Meath | St Brendan of Birr | Ireland | iii.3 | No | |
| Hinba | Iona | St Columba | Dál Riata | iii.5 | Yes | |
| Dunadd? | Iona | Áedán mac Gabráin | Dál Riata | iii.5 | Yes | |
| Co. Armagh? | Iona | Pilgrim of the Airthir | Insular | iii.7 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 188. |
| Leinster | Iona | Travellers | Insular | iii.12 | Yes | |
| Bangor? | Belfast Lough | St Comgall's monks, and a visitor | Ireland | iii.13 | Yes | |
| Loch Ness | Glen Urquhart? | St Columba and companions | Pictland | iii.14 | No | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 381. |
| Aghaboe, Co. Laois? | Hinba | St Cainnech | Insular | iii.17 | Yes | |
| Clonfert, Co. Galway? | Hinba | St Brendan the Navigator | Insular | iii.17 | Yes | |
| Bangor? | Hinba | St Comgall | Insular | iii.17 | Yes | |
| Durrow? | Hinba | Cormac Ua Liatháin | Insular | iii.17 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 323. |
| ??? | Eigg | Baithéne | Dál Riata | iii.18 | Yes | |
| Eigg | Hinba | Baithéne | Dál Riata | iii.18 | Yes | See above, Chapter Four, p. 229, n. 169. |
| Ireland? | Hinba | Fergnae | Insular | iii.23 | Yes | Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, n. 414. |
| Hinba | Muirbolc Már? | Fergnae | Dál Riata | iii.23 | Yes | See above, Chapter Four, p. 228, n. 165. |

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